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**When the Moon Shines**

by *imaginexwriter9*

**Summary**

Hoping to survive his prophecy, Seth Hunter accepts the tutelage of Walt Forger, a demigod trainer in hiding. While juggling espionage missions, old enemies, and his estrangement with Artemis, Seth Hunter rediscovers his identity and must make a choice that decides the outcome of the war as well as his future... Rick Riordan owns PJATO
Dr. Thorn sat in his newly furbished office with pride.

Drumming his fingers leisurely on his glass desk, Dr. Thorn looked out the big window, seeing the mortals scrambling about as they placed 'computer parts' into packages that were being loaded into trucks. He could also see the big industrial edifices in the distance, the smoke dark and vibrant, showcasing the work produced within.

Ever since the titan Atlas was forced back into carrying his burden nearly two years ago, Dr. Thorn (who was now known as Mr. Bane) was one of the few monsters that had managed to escape. Those demigods were much more troublesome than they had thought. If only the titan had listened to his suggestion on killing that Chase girl, they would have been one enemy short. But who did the titan listen to instead of him?

Dr. Thorn scoffed at the irony of it all. Demigods were their enemies. It was risky to even accept any of them into Kronos' Army in the first place. They were too unpredictable, which made them even more dangerous. But it was because they were such a danger that the Titan Lord decided to use them and hopefully, when the war was over and Kronos was once again in power, demigods would no longer be an impediment.

For now, Dr. Thorn was currently in charge of Micro World, a supposedly well established mortal company that manufactured computers, laptops, and other electronic parts, but in actuality was one of the companies that aided Kronos in developing weapons for the army. Dr. Thorn couldn't help but feel proud of being given this immensely honorable position. The weapons were coming along nicely, and by the time the month ended, they would have reached their quota.

There was a soft knock on the door. Dr. Thorn spun his armchair towards the entry as the door opened to reveal his timid, clean-cut secretary.

"I-I apologize for the disturbance Mr. Bane sir…" the mortal woman started.

"What is it?" Dr. Thorn said impatiently. Sometimes he wondered why he even kept this female mortal around: Probably because her obvious fear of him satisfied him.

"You have an interview with a possible intern here today," the secretary finished. "He's here to see you."

Intern? Dr. Thorn didn't remember such a meeting, but that was likely since Dr. Thorn didn't care for mortal matters much, which was why he had his secretary to remind him. It's best to keep up appearances.

"Bring him in." Dr. Thorn muttered. Maybe this potential intern would make a good midnight snack.

The secretary nodded, disappearing out of sight as a young boy with black hair and spectacles came in. He was dressed formally, donning a black suit and tie. His hair was slick back, and his dark grey eyes were looking around the room curiously before he finally sat down in front of him. The name John Doe sprawled on the visitor sticker.

"So… John Doe," Dr. Thorn said doubtfully. Was this really the boy's name? "What made you so interested in working here?"

"I like computers," the boy said blandly. Dr. Thorn waited, but seeing as how the boy remained
silent, as if what he said was a good enough reason, was almost enough to piss him off.

"You…like computers?" he repeated. "Isn't there anything else?"

"No, that's about it," the boy said, "unless you count video games? I rather enjoyed Assassin's Creed."

Dr. Thorn didn't even bother to disguise his annoyance and growing anger. Who did this mortal boy think he was? Never mind a midnight snack, the insolent whelp was starting to look like a good appetizer.

"Is that right?" Dr. Thorn said, his voice straining to keep his anger in. "Let's start with your qualifications then Mr. Doe. How old are you?"

"15."

Dr. Thorn forced himself to keep his face blank. Fifteen? He was expecting the kid to be at least 17 by the looks of him. "A high school student. Do you have your resume?"

"No."

"What? What do you mean 'No'?" he demanded.

The boy shrugged. "I'm home-schooled. Never went to an institution in my life."

"That still does not mean you shouldn't have one." Dr. Thorn muttered. His hands were clenched into fists. He was the manager of this company for crying out loud, a vital asset to the Titan Lord! Yet here he was, being insulted by this brat?

"Sir, I think you are asking me the wrong questions." John Doe said quietly.

"Excuse me?!"

"Aren't you curious about my interests? Besides gaming of course," the boy added snidely.

Dr. Thorn gave a forced smile, but he was sure it turned out to be a grimace. The boy still smiled at him, either completely oblivious to his irritation or purposely encouraging it.

"What…are your interests then?" Dr. Thorn said slowly. "If you are so keen on saying them…"

If possible, the boy's smile grew larger. "Well let's see: I recalled piggyback riding a lion was quite entertaining. Not to mention that said lion turned out to be so cowardly that it actually took one of my friends hostage just to escape." The boy paused, his features completely stoic. "But I'm sure you know all about that. Right, Dr. Thorn?"

Dr. Thorn's eyes flashed, and in an instant, he transformed into the Manticore. He swung his scorpion tail to crush him. When the smoke and debris cleared, the boy was already out of his chair and had taken out a pair of familiar black daggers to block his attack.

"Seth Hunter!" Dr. Thorn said the name with malice. "How dare you show your face here?"

Seth only raised an eyebrow, clearly mocking him. "What gave me away? Was it my weapons? Because I'm quite sure my disguise was flawless, and to think I spent all that time masking my demigod scent for nothing." The two had separated themselves from the impact. Seth took that moment to take off his glasses, his eyes appearing bright silver. He slipped his glasses into the suit pocket.
"This is much better," he said calmly. "Now I can definitely see your hideous form much clearer, Manticore."

"You dare insult me!" Dr. Thorn screeched, sending a wave of spikes towards the brat. The boy only continued to aggravate him by leaping high into the air, dodging his attacks, while summoning a silver bow in mid-air and shooting just as fast.

Dr. Thorn quickly moved to the side, wincing when one of the arrows got embedded into his arm. He yanked it out roughly. He sneered at him.

"Do you really think you can win against me Seth Hunter? You couldn't even defeat me even with the help of your friends!"

The boy only narrowed his eyes at him. "Think what you like, but I would recommend that you don't underestimate me. I'm not as weak and naïve as I was back then. To get straight to the point: I have a proposition to make."

Dr. Thorn scoffed. "Are you surrendering already?"

Seth only looked at him coldly. His bow had vanished. "As if. There is a reason why I sought you out and I want you to answer some questions of my own. You could either give them to me willingly….or I can beat it out of you. Your choice."

He laughed. "Are you telling me that you think you can get me to do what you want?"

"Not think, know." Seth muttered. "What's your decision?"

"You have some nerve coming here alone Hunter." Dr. Thorn said. "Even more irritating is that arrogance!" Suddenly he released even more spikes towards the demigod, who quickly sidestepped his attacks. As the boy drew closer, he aimed a punch towards him, only to have the demigod swerve it and land a high kick to his face.

He staggered, surprised and unable to recover as Seth continuously landed multiple attacks on him. By the end of his onslaught, he has been pierced, punched, and kicked numerous times on his head and body, but he was far from finished.

He roared. His body heavily armored with spikes as he charged forward. The boy was forced on the defensive until he was backed into a corner. Instead of being trapped however, the brat walked up the wall to move passed him from above. He ended up getting himself stuck and by the time he freed himself, he noticed Seth had pulled out a mortal gun, fully loaded and facing him.

"A mortal gun?" Dr. Thorn laughed. "Are you stupid, boy? Don't you demigods know-!

BANG!

He gasped, blood gushing out from his mouth. He was actually wounded. Blood seeped out from his chest profusely. He found himself kneeling, his hand over his injury.

"W-what…"

The boy only stared down at his knelt position, his silver eyes patronizing and icy cold.

"You shouldn't look down on mortal weapons, you know." Seth said quietly. "They are actually quite efficient. Given the right material, they have the potential to be more deadly than old fashioned swords. I can't believe this is your first time seeing one." He moved towards him. For the first time,
Dr. Thorn noticed how relaxed his opponent was, like their battle was only a stroll in the park!

"I've read about you, Dr. Thorn. I know how durable you are in battle, and seeing your fight from last time, I knew that even celestial bronze weapons won't bring you down so easily. So I decided to take precautions this time." Seth muttered, directing his gun towards his head. Dr. Thorn's eyes widened with shock. "Instead of the regular mortal bullets that you so ignorantly expected, these bullets are made with imperial gold."

Dr. Thorn trembled, his head slightly faint. He clenched his teeth. He refused to be brought down like this: A gun with imperial gold bullets? Ha!

"What do you want, boy?" Dr. Thorn gasped.

"Answers. Are you willing to give them to me now?"

Dr. Thorn glowered at him, but finally thought about what the brat suggested. So he wanted answers. No doubt concerning Kronos' plans. He sneered. As long as he gave the brat a couple of convincing lies, the boy would come here for nothing! Hunter already believed he was too weak to attack him. He'd strike and end that brat for good once his back was turned.

"Ask them."

"How many weapons have you produced?" Seth inquired. "I know what this company truly is, don't bother denying it, and give me an exact number."

"About 10,532 celestial bronze weapons," Dr. Thorn said slyly. The brat thought he could measure our army size based on our weapons. Let them underestimate us, when really their weapons quota was nearly five times that amount.

Seth only stared at him, his silver eyes unnerved him. He'd gouge them out first once he was able to attack.

"You're lying."

Dr. Thorn clenched his teeth...how did the brat know? He was certain that his expression was convincing enough. Maybe this was a trick.

"I'm not. We really do have 10,532-!"

"Do you want to know what happens if you continue to lie to me?" Seth said darkly. He suddenly pulled out a device. "How many industrial plants do you have around here Dr. Thorn? Around 5 or 6 I gather right?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" he demanded. The brat smiled, as if he found something amusing.

"You have quite a nice view here, Dr. Thorn. I was admiring it when I came in." Seth said casually. His gun was still pointed at his head. "I see that you have 6 industrial plants in perfect condition. Now take a look, this is what happens when you lie..."

He pressed down on the device. Almost instantly, there was a huge rumbling sound as one of the 6 industrial plants- the weapon storehouses- suddenly burst into flames. Dr. Thorn stared in shock and dismay as numerous explosions continued to occur simultaneously. He watched in horror as one of the plants was now reduced to ashes and rubble.
"Dr. Thorn, you are now reduced to only 5 industrial plants. Would you like to make that 4?"

The Manticore only stared at the demigod in shock. "How did you do it? What is that device you have in your hand?!"

"Oh this?" Seth said, waving the damn device in front him tauntingly. "This thing just activates the Greek fire bombs that my mentor and I placed prior to my coming here." Seeing how Dr. Thorn was still gaping at him in silence, Seth continued. "Do you honestly think I waltzed in here unprepared? You will give me the answers I seek or else this company will be reduced to shreds."

"So you've resorted to blackmail Hunter?" Dr. Thorn sneered. "How unbecoming for a demigod-you would sacrifice those mortals working in my plants just for some answers?"

Seth glared at him. "Mortals who have given their allegiance to Kronos you mean? Those mortals? I don't give a damn."

Dr. Thorn stared at him in disbelief. "What?"

"Is it so surprising? You monsters do it all the time, yet you find it astonishing when a human does it?" Seth stated. "I've been watching them you know...weeks of observation. Just in case you happened to have forced them into this business. If that were the case, I would have raised the alarm and let them escape before exploding the building. But I didn't see, hear, or feel any of that. So if you thought I gave a damn to mortals who betrayed their own race just to satisfy their greed and desires...you are sadly mistaken."

"But let's not dwindle on that." Seth said. "Answer my questions truthfully, and I might be merciful enough to give you a quick painless death."

Dr. Thorn grew hesitant. Seth Hunter, since last he saw him, was a completely different person. He once thought of him weaker than the Big Three children, a follower with those pathetic, idealistic virtues that those demigods shared. Yet now, he has managed to overtake him alone without breaking a sweat, and wasn't afraid to sacrifice mortals in the process. Dr. Thorn couldn't help but admire this new change.

"What are you smiling about?" Seth said warily.

Dr. Thorn sneered. "Why is a cold killer like you on the side of the gods?" Seth frowned. "Your behavior is far better suited for those within Kronos' Army. Yet you are still groveling under the gods' whim."

"I have my own reasons, Manticore. None of which is any of your business." Seth stated. "If not sparing a few mortals in the process makes me known as a killer, then your definition of murder and violence is considerably dim. Now quit making such irrational, hypocritical remarks and answer my question."

The Manticore narrowed his eyes. He didn't know how Seth could tell he was lying before. So this time he decided to test him.

"We have around...50,239 celestial weapons." Dr. Thorn said truthfully. "Though, with only five plants left, those weapons may be down to around 42,000."

"I see." The brat seemed satisfied with the answer. "I also want you to tell me the names of the deities who have joined Kronos' cause."

"What?!" Dr. Thorn exclaimed. "How would I know anything about that?! Lord Kronos didn't tell
"Do you think I care?" Seth said blandly. "Your life is on the line, Dr. Thorn, and I know you must know at least the names of some of your allies."

Dr. Thorn gritted his teeth. The blood around his wound has stopped seeping, which meant he was starting to heal. He had to delay the brat.

"Well?" the boy said impatiently.

"The minor deities...I believe one of them is *Tyche.*" Dr. Thorn lied. There was no way this brat was getting the names from him! Maybe he could convince the gods to turn on their allies!

Seth narrowed his eyes, and sighed dramatically. "Monsters...to think they would change." He pressed the device again, and Dr. Thorn nearly yelled when he saw another of his industrial plants burst into flames.

"Didn't I tell you to quit lying to me?" the boy hissed. "Perhaps you need better encouragement." He directed his gun towards his chest and shot again in the same exact spot! Dr. Thorn roared in pain. His chest wound and right hand badly injured.

"*How are you doing it?!*" he gasped. "*H-how could you tell I was lying?!*"

"I'll admit that the facial expressions and the tone of your voice make your lies sound very convincing." Seth replied. "In fact, if you were facing another demigod unlike me I'm sure you would have tricked them."

"T-then how..."

"Simple. *It's your heart.*"

The Manticore nearly gasped out of shock. His heart? The brat was listening to his heart beat? Then that would mean...

"Yes, Dr. Thorn. I have a *sharp hearing ability.*" Seth muttered. "Do you know that every time a person lies, that no matter how good a liar they are- their heart always reveals the truth? There is always that change in rhythm. Some more slight than others, but it's always there."

Dr. Thorn slumped down. Suddenly realizing the harsh dilemma he was in. Was it possible...that he's at a loss?

"Good," Seth stated. "You are finally starting to show *fear.* Your heartbeat is going in such frenzy right now. I wonder what I did to speed it up."

"Shut up!" Dr. Thorn screeched. His life be damned- he could always regenerate, but he would make sure that this brat went with him! He lunged forward with the intention of grabbing the brat's neck-!

Instead, he felt something pierce his own neck.

The Manticore choked, blood instantly seeping out of his mouth. His opponent's calculating gaze upon him. He had been paying so much attention to the mortal gun in his left hand that he didn't bother to consider the boy using one of his daggers instead.

"I mentioned in the beginning that I've read up on you," Seth mumbled. "The information was hard
to dig up, but to think the hollow part of your throat was your weak spot, not bad for an Achilles heel." The boy quickly withdrew his weapon, blood smearing his face and parts of his suit while doing so. "Make sure you take your sweet time in Tartarus. Say hello to your buddies for me."

With that said, Dr. Thorn breathed his last as his body dissolved into dust.

Seth Hunter surveyed the damage. There were now numerous cracks on the walls and damaged furniture. It was a good thing he applied some Mist before entering the room. The noise of his battle with the Manticore would have alerted unwanted attention. He placed his gun back into his chest strap and his held dagger back onto his belt (after wiping off the stains first). He also took off the black wig he had on, revealing dark auburn hair that went just past his eyes. Once he has done so, his cell phone started ringing in his pocket.

"Hunter." Seth responded, and quickly drew the phone away on reflex as the person on the other end started shouting:

"YOU CERTAINLY TOOK YOUR DAMN SWEET TIME HUNTER! WHAT WERE YOU DOING PLAYING AROUND?! HOW DARE YOU MAKE ME WAIT SO LONG IN THIS RIDICULOUS WEATHER?"

"Sorry Walt." Seth muttered. "I just didn't think any bullets should be wasted on a creature like him-!

"WHAT NONSENSE IS THIS?! BULLETS ARE MEANT TO BE USED! NOT AS A LAST RESORT YOU IDIOT!" Walt, his mentor, continued to berate him. Seth started rubbing his forehead, his eyebrow twitching in annoyance.

"Now unlock this door already! Security is starting to get crazy out here!" Walt yelled, his anger slowly residing. "You're finally alone right?"

Seth closed his cell and walked over to the computer lying on the glass desk. Based on what Walt had instructed him, he quickly found the right files and buttons, successfully unlocking all doors to allow strangers into the compromise. After around 10 minutes, a bulky, middle-aged dark haired man appeared on the other side of the room, a briefcase in hand.

"What a mess." Walt muttered, looking at the room in disgust. "At least you have some sense to keep the computer undamaged, or my coming here would be meaningless."

"Of course Walt," Seth muttered absentmindedly. Walt only huffed in response before plugging in his hard drive into the computer. His fingers soaring across the keyboard as he quickly hacked into the system. Files were popping out and in a matter of minutes Walt had successfully downloaded every critical data into the hard drive while inserting a well encrypted virus to destroy any trances.

"Now let's get out of here. With those hectic explosions earlier, there's bound to be some flies." Walt said gruffly. He gave Seth a glance. "Are those bloodstains on the suit?"

Seth cursed in his mind.

"YOU BETTER DRY CLEAN THAT UNTIL THAT SUIT IS SPOTLESS YOU HEAR ME?!!" Walt shouted. "I AIN'T GONNA TOLERATE MONSTER FILTH IN THE HOUSE!"

"Yes, Walt." Seth said, exasperated as the two of them left the room. His ears were still wincing from Walt's yelling. He still wondered if Walt was doing it on purpose just to aggravate him.

"Don't forget to do the laundry either."
"I know."

"My desk is starting to gather dust, I expect you to clean it once we get back."

"Got it."

"Also don't forget-!"

"Rearranging the book shelf, cleaning up the arena, and preparing dinner," Seth finished. Oh gods, he really did have a lot to do later. Walt narrowed his eyes at him.

"What did I say about interrupting me?"

"I'm sorry Walt."

Once the two were outside, they found Walt's jeep located in the edge of the forest. There were already numerous reporters and news vans present due to the explosions, but no one batted an eye at the dark haired man and his accomplice as they walked right by. When they were finally situated in the car, Walt gave an irritated glance.

"What are you waiting for, Hunter? Blow up the rest."

Seth nodded.

They were already at a distance away when they heard it: the sound of buildings crashing down that would inevitably destroy the rest of the weapons supply. Seth saw the smoke rising into the sky from the rear view mirror. Based on what little he gathered from the Manticore, things were really much worse than they had thought. Well, at least they were able to strike a blow against the enemy.

He pitied the one who must report this to Kronos.

-0-
Arrival

Chapter Summary

In which Seth Hunter meets his new mentors.

After over four hours on the road, I was expecting a lot more than this. Once I got off the New York City bus, I was stranded in an old, broken down station by the open highway with no houses or people present. There was a lot of snow and sleet piled around the side of the road, but that was only to be expected: it was the middle of January. The small rural town of Wilmington, Massachusetts has always been a rather cold place.

I stuffed my gloved hand in my coat pocket, my breath forming mist in the air as I breathed heavily. My other hand grasped the medium size bag filled with necessities. I also had on a regular school bag. I didn't own that many things.

I took a look around as I walked out of the station. I was sure that I was in the right place. I checked the address Hermes gave me so many times that I'd lost count. I was sure Mr. Forger's residence had to be nearby, yet not a single building was in sight.

I picked up the sound of clacking high heels approaching. I turned and noticed a stern, dark-haired, Asian woman, around her late twenties. She could be considered very pretty, if not for the frown and mirthless expression. She had her hair wrapped in a bun expertly, and had on low heeled boots and a dark grey petticoat, reminding me of a winter season model. Her stoic, dark grey eyes glanced over me as she stood in front of me.

"Are you Seth Hunter?" she asked.

I nodded, narrowing my eyes suspiciously. "Walt Forger?"

She gave a curt nod. "My name is Lynetta Lin. I am Mr. Forger's assistant. I am here as your guide."

"A pleasure to meet you," I greeted her respectfully.

Lynetta lifted her chin slightly. "Before we proceed, however, I must ask you a couple questions Mr. Hunter." When I appeared confused, Lynetta continued, "These questions are standard. Mr. Forger requires that I ask them to every potential apprentice before meeting him officially. I will determine whether your answers are good enough."

"What if they aren't good enough?" I asked.

Lynetta stared at me. "Then I simply leave you here. You will be forced to go back to where you came." She continued before I could protest. "Mr. Forger is a man who values his time. He will not be bothered by little boys and girls who won't make the effort to succeed in his training. He also values his privacy, which is why only those I deem worthy may see his residence. So make sure you think before you answer."

Mr. Forger must trust Lynetta a whole lot to let her make the decisions.
"I understand," I answered.

"Good," Lynetta replied. "Seth Hunter, what do you hope to accomplish with Mr. Forger's training?"

*I want to be stronger.* Those were the words that instantly went through my mind, but I kept my mouth shut. Somehow, that answer didn't seem *enough.* Every student before me probably desired to become stronger one way or another. It was too common a response. So what could I say to make myself stand out? What would be deemed as 'satisfactory'?

There was one response floating through my head, but I hesitated. My prophecy was private. I didn't want to give anything away, especially to someone I just met, someone I didn't *trust.* I was still skeptical of this Walt Forger guy. Unfortunately, that was the only response that I believed would be of any worth.

"I want to *survive,*" I said finally. The statement was clear yet vague. *"I want to live.* No matter how much the odds are against me, or how many foes I have to face, in the end, I want to be able to live my life the way I've always wanted to. With Walt Forger's training, I hope to be strong enough to survive these obstacles."

Lynetta left her expression blank. "I see. Not a bad answer, but you must realize, Mr. Hunter, that Mr. Forger's training is not meant to go against fate."

"It's not!" I said quickly, Lynetta raised an eyebrow. "I…I mean, it doesn't have to end that way, so it's not going against anything."

She appeared thoughtful. "Very well. Mr. Hunter, do you know what your *fatal flaw* is?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Excuse me?" I said, apprehensive.

"Mr. Forger modifies the training to suit the student's needs. One aspect of his training involves overcoming the student's fatal flaw."

"Oh." That made some sense, but again, I felt like this information was personal. How would Mr. Forger help me overcome *emotion?* By telling me not to feel at all? That didn't seem likely.

"Well?" Lynetta said, sounding slightly impatient.

I sighed, and said quietly, "it's emotion."

"*Emotion,*" Lynetta repeated, pursing her lips. "Interesting. Come along Seth, I will take you to Walt Forger. Try to keep up."

I mentally sighed in relief. It appeared that I had passed Lynetta's test, but something bothered me.

"Ms. Lin, if I may ask…?"

"What is it? And please, just call me Lynetta," Lynetta said without stopping. I struggled to keep up in this six inch snow. Apparently, this place was too deserted for snow tractors to come by.

"What does a fatal flaw have anything to do with passing your test?" I asked.

She stopped. Turning around to face me, she answered, "there are certain flaws out there that Mr.
Forger is unable to fix, simply because it is unsuitable for his style of training. Luckily for you, yours fall under his specialty."

"His specialty huh?" I muttered. I did not like the thought one bit. Lynetta didn't say anything else.

I didn't ask any more questions.

After about a half-mile walk, my knees were starting to ache when Lynetta finally led me off road, walking past deciduous trees and large lumps of snow until we reached a visible building. The building was a Tudor style single family home, around thirty kilometers apart from the surrounding trees, with no cleared pathway. Lynetta had proceeded to open the door with a spare key by the time we reached the porch.

When the door opened, a long narrow, dim-lit hallway greeted us. I analyzed my surroundings as I walked in. There were a couple closed doors on the side, a spiral staircase on the left, while on the right there was yet another dark corridor. Lynetta led me to the last door at the end of the hall. She opened it, and almost instantly, the smell of smoke was vibrant. There was a sound of drilling and metals clashing.

"Mr. Forger!" Lynetta called out amidst the noise. "Your student has arrived."

When the smoke finally cleared, I was finally able to see who Walt Forger was. He appeared to be a grown middle aged man who had a bulky frame and dark hair that had wisps of gray. His face was cleanly shaven and was covered by large plastic goggles. He had just placed an electronic drill driver on the table and proceeded to yank off his navy blue work apron when he finally took off his goggles, his dark brown eyes narrowed when he saw me.

"By the gods," he muttered as he scrutinized me, "so it is true after all. Are you a child of Artemis or Diana?"

"Aren't they the same person?" I questioned.

Walt appeared amused. "That depends. Where do you train?"


"Really?" Walt mumbled. Lynetta watched our exchange with interest. "If you're a Greek, then how are you able to converse with me so fluently?"

"Converse..." Then, I suddenly realized with shock that Walt wasn't speaking in English, but in Latin. "I don't know. It just came naturally to me." I said that part in English.

"I've heard of Greeks who know bits of Latin, but their level is nowhere near fluency," Walt continued, switching to English, "Lynetta, my assistant, is a daughter of Athena, and even she has trouble understanding me despite taking some online Latin courses. I will ask again, are you a child of Rome or Greece?" Then, he added curiously, "or are you perhaps both?"

"I don't understand," I said honestly, "I've been at Camp Half-Blood since I became aware of my identity. Wouldn't that make me Greek?"

Greek, Roman...just what was going on here? Why was there such a difference? I had known since day one at Camp that my mind was supposed to be hard-wired for Ancient Greek, but to understand Latin at this advanced degree...

"Mr. Forger," Lynetta said. "Wouldn't this prove that what Lord Hermes said about his condition to
be true?"

"So it is," Walt muttered, before turning his attention to me. "You are a copy of Diana?"

I swallowed, still not used to that description. "Yes, Mr. Forger, though I prefer Artemis."

Walt huffed. "Fine, stay Greek. I suppose we better get the pleasantries and rules out of the way before we start. Lord Hermes has already informed you of my real occupation correct?"

I nodded. "Yes, Mr. Forger."

"Call me 'sir' Hunter, since you are now my student," Walt demanded. "Only my associates and Lynetta call me Mr. Forger. It is until you reach a point in your training, then you may call me Walt. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," Walt said. "As you already know, I am a retired demigod, a son of Vulcan, otherwise known as Hephaestus for you Greeks. While my occupation is a trainer, I do have a mortal job as a hacker-!"

"A hacker?" I said dubiously. "Isn't that ill-!"

"-which leads me to my first rule!" Walt said. "No interruptions! If you do interrupt, by the gods someone better be on their way to Lord Pluto if you do!"

I nodded immediately.

"Second rule: while you are training with me, you are also expected to do chores whenever I ask you to. I do not want any whining or complaints like 'but sir, I'm too tired!' or 'Sir, can I do it later?' or even 'Why me?' None of that, got it? I like living in a strictly clean and orderly fashion and that will not change while you are here."

"Yes, sir," I muttered.

"Next, you are also expected to follow Lynetta's instructions without question." Walt continued. "She is my right hand, and in charge whenever I happen to be out. Also, starting next week, she will also act as your tutor. I don't want you slacking on your mortal education, so you will have lessons with Lynetta on the weekends, but are expected to study at least an hour each day whenever you are free."

"Now, as long as you follow those three golden rules, we won't have any problems." Walt replied. "As for the minor details- if you happen to have a question, direct those to Lynetta. I am a busy man Hunter, and I do not have the luxury to deal with small issues. Also, one other thing, you are not permitted to enter this room without my or Lynetta's consent. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Walt gave a brief nod. "Lynetta, see to it that Seth Hunter gets an elaborate tour of the building. I don't want to deal with lost kids."

"Right away, Mr. Forger," Lynetta replied curtly, before throwing me a glance. "Follow me."

-o-

"This will be your room," Lynetta began as I took a look around.
I placed my bag and backpack on the made bed as I took in my surroundings. There was a single drawer, empty bookshelf, and standard vanity table, and a door that led to my own bathroom. There was also a small circular window at the top, and an empty closet underneath it. By the closet, there was a mahogany table, lounge chair, and fluorescent lamp. Overall, the room appeared very bland, with no source of decoration on these plain, white walls.

"This will be your place of study and rest." Lynetta informed me. "Curfew is at 11 pm sharp, and you are expected to be here by that time unless told otherwise. Now come with me, you will have time for a break later. I only came to show you your room first to allow you to drop off your things." I nodded, and without a word, Lynetta and I proceeded to go out of my room and down the spiral staircase.

The house was much bigger than it appeared. Once Lynetta showed me the dining room, kitchen, music room, and various supply rooms for food and other materials, she led me down a lit stairway. Once we reached the bottom, I had to blink twice to comprehend what I was seeing.

The whole 'basement' was the size of a football field, with sturdy transparent walls separating the space to different compartments. I noticed how there was an archery range, filled with still and moving targets. On the side there were bows of different types and sizes, along with spears. There was also an armory of different swords, shields, and axes aligned on the walls. A boxing ring and a complex jungle gym was on the other side, and to my surprise, I even saw different guns and rifles placed allow a row of targets. All of this was only on the ground floor.

I noticed a metal stairway by the side of the exit when I came in. Upstairs, I noticed various exercising equipment: weights, Fitness Trainers, and different size punching bags.

There was no way a regular Tudor house could fit all this in. The basement must have been magically enlarged or something.

"This is the Training Room." Lynetta announced, her voice echoing in the vast space. "As you can probably tell, this is where you and Mr. Forger will spend most of your training, hence the name. You are allowed access to any of these weapons so long as they remain here and are placed back correctly."

I didn't say anything, still overwhelmed by the size and resources of this place.

"Do you have any questions?" Lynetta stated.

I thought about it for a moment. "How do you know Walt Forger?"

"I was a previous student of his," Lynetta said, surprising me. "It was a while ago."

"So you succeeded in his training?" I asked her. She nodded.

"Yes."

"How long did that take you?"

Lynetta replied, "around a year or so. Most students take around one to two years if they put forth the effort, some even up to five years."

"Five years?" I exclaimed.

She stared at me. "Everyone's abilities are different. Five years may not seem much so long as the student is able to complete it. Many in the past have failed to meet up to Mr. Forger's expectations"
despite the period of time, and were forced to drop it completely."

"How many students does he usually have?"

"At a given time? Up to three students."

"How long has Mr. Forger been training demigods?"

"It has been...thirty years," Lynetta informed me. "In that time span, I believe Mr. Forger has taught over sixty students."

"I see," I muttered. Hermes had told me that Walt had a less than twenty percent success rate. So out of the sixty students, less than twelve students have succeeded?

"I'm sure you will do well," Lynetta told me. I was taken aback by the sudden encouragement. Lynetta appeared so expressionless and uncaring that I didn't expect that from her. "Judging from your responses earlier, I'm positive you will succeed. Mr. Forger and I are, no doubt, very curious of how your training will turn out."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Your heritage," Lynetta answered. I fought back the urge to roll my eyes. I should have expected that. "We have never come across a child of Artemis (or Diana) before. I am personally very interested in your abilities and progress."

"Speaking of heritage, what did Mr. Forger mean about being 'Greek' or 'Roman'?" I asked suspiciously.

Lynetta's face darkened. "It means exactly that. I am a Greek demigod, while Mr. Forger is Roman. We are born from different aspects of our parents."

"Aspects," I repeated to myself. So each god had a different side to them? Walt said he was a son of Vulcan, not Hephaestus, but what about me? How could I be both? Was it because I was a copy?

"He also asked where I was trained," I mentioned. "Does that mean...there is a Roman camp out there? If there is, why are we not made aware of it?"

"It's best if you don't know too much about this," Lynetta warned. "The gods have kept the two camps separated for centuries. If either the Greeks or the Romans become aware of each other, there will be strife."

"So basically we don't get along with each other?"

"That's putting it lightly, but yes."

"But if Walt is Roman, then why does he take in Greek demigods?"

Lynetta shrugged. "Who knows? He's unbiased. He trains whoever has the desire to be trained, but enough on this subject, it is almost time for dinner."

-o-

"Seth, do you have any experience in cooking?"

We have gone back upstairs. Lynetta and I were now in the medium size kitchen, currently hovering over the oven and fridge. The kitchen had a faint light due to the half-drawn curtains. Everything
was neat and tidy.

"Um, not really," I admitted. The only kind of food I managed to cook by myself was instant. I doubted those count. Most of the time, I remember it was Ms. Lewinsky or some of the young girls who cooked our meals and it was always the nymphs that prepared our food at Camp Half-Blood, so technically I had no reason to learn.

Lynetta only looked at me, before tossing me a white apron. "You're in luck: I happen to be an expert in the culinary arts. Be sure to watch me and follow my instructions. As your training progresses, I will be expecting you to prepare your own meals and even for me and Mr. Forger."

"Alright," I replied, tying the strings behind my back. Cooking huh? I never thought I'd be taught this skill here.

For the next half hour, Lynetta instructed me to wash the vegetables while she cut them up expertly with a kitchen knife. I started to cut the noodles into perfect lengths as Lynetta boiled the carrots, turnips, onions, and broccoli in the pot. When we finally finished, Lynetta told me to pour Alfredo onto the contents, and into a big bowl set in the dining table.

While I poured, I commented, "you're really good with the knife."

"It's a handy skill to have," she replied, setting up the silverware.

"I take it you prefer using knives in a battle?"

"Correct, but if given a choice, I prefer to use a rifle. It's much cleaner and efficient." Lynetta said, and before I questioned how any guns could damage the monsters, she already left to call Walt.

Dinner was quiet. When Walt finally arrived, his attention was focused on some makeshift device. He started tweaking it with a screwdriver and tapping visible buttons while he paused to swallow his food. Lynetta ate silently, folding a napkin and shoving it under the collar of her shirt to act as a bib. I ate slowly as well, discreetly analyzing the people I was going to spend time with for the next couple of months.

"What weapons do you prefer, Hunter?" Walt asked. He had finished eating, as did Lynetta, who was gathering up the dirty plates, and quickly departed for the kitchen.

"A bow and quiver," I said instantly, "along with two daggers I own."

"Just like one of Lady Diana's hunters." Walt muttered. "Anything else?"

"I'm proficient with a spear and an axe," I said, "but I'm horrible with swords."

"Hmm, how about combat? Do you take martial arts? Karate?"

"The camp teaches wrestling and martial arts, but I do know karate."

"So you're physically flexible?" Walt asked.

I nodded.

"Good. We'll put those claims to the test tomorrow morning," Walt said, and then he tossed me the device he was working on. "This will be your communicator. It allows you to contact me and Lynetta directly. I've hard-wired it to make sure it receives signal easily so no single company can trace it. Make sure to keep this with you at all times."
"Okay, sir."

"You may choose to leave now and go to your room. I'm sure Lynetta has some things to give you," Walt dismissed. I gave a nod and left.

In my new room, I noticed a neat stack of textbooks on the table. All of them were in English text, so I squinted my eyes a bit. I finally read the subjects as Physics, Calculus, Biology, and Literature. All of them were in the Advanced Placement level. Lynetta had left a note, telling me to read through the first two chapters of each of these books before the weekend. I sighed, propping myself on the bed.

It was going to be a long day tomorrow.

-o-
"Show me what you've got, Greek." Walt replied.

It was now just past 6 am. Walt and Lynetta had dragged me down to the training room first thing after I changed into sweats and ate a quick breakfast. I was still feeling the effects of drowsiness as I stood in front of a jumbo-size red punching bag. I had on boxing gloves.

"During the time you spend here, you will be expected to complete monthly examinations." Walt explained. "Your first test is an aptitude test, among other things. This test is only used to measure your strengths and weaknesses as well as your skills with different weapons. This test sets precedence for the next test. As you progress, the monthly exams will get harder and harder until the point you complete your training to my satisfaction. If you don't pass an exam however, you are given a reprieve only once since no one is perfect. If you fail a second time, you can go pack your bags! No excuses!"

I only nodded. So basically this first aptitude test was supposed to be the easiest among them. Those monthly exams must be difficult for so many people to drop out. Instead of discouraging me, Walt only enforced my resolve to succeed. My new goal was to complete his training, and I wasn't about let his words deter my current reason for existing.

"We will test your physical strength first." Walt informed me. "Punch the bag as hard as you can, and no kicking!"

I nodded, positioning myself just right before I aimed a straight punch at the bag. The chains holding the bag shook a bit. I looked at Walt, who threw me an irritated glance.

"Keep going! Did I tell you to stop?"

I clenched my teeth as I did as Walt instructed. Left punch, right punch, overhand, under-hand- I kept at it for who knew how long. The once unused punching bag was now looking worn by the time Walt told me to stop.

"Not bad." Walt muttered, inspecting the bag thoroughly. "Could use more force, your endurance is good however…"

"Lynetta, show him how it's done." Walt instructed. She nodded, stepping up to take my place.

Instead of the formal attire I saw her in, this time Lynetta was wearing a black tank top and sweatpants. Her dark hair now done up in a makeshift ponytail instead of a bun, making her appear younger. She put the boxing gloves on, and once she aimed, there was a loud resounding BAM! The chains shook violently, and after a couple punches, the punching bag looked dead: completely beat up. There was even stuffing coming out from the ends due to the pressure Lynetta inflicted. Midway through, I was surprised the chains were even holding.

I felt my jaw drop in sheer amazement. My punches were child's play compare to hers! Even the Ares kids I've seen didn't match up to Lynetta's level of force.

"That will do, Lynetta." Walt said as Lynetta quickly drew back. She didn't even lose a sweat.

"Remind me not to get on your bad side," I muttered to her as she stood next to me. She didn't smile, but her eyes had a small hint of amusement.
"Lynetta, as I'm sure you heard, is one of the few pupils that completed my training." Walt said. "If you are to succeed in this apprenticeship, destroying punching bags like these will only be one of the many things you will accomplish. Let's continue on."

He led me to a different room, with Lynetta trailing behind me. When we enter, the first thing I noticed were the different kinds of wooden boards set up. Instead of leading me directly to those boards however, I noticed Walt had stopped in the middle of the clearing, a bell dangling just a few inches above my head.

"The next test: make the bell ring without using your hands."

Without using my hands…wouldn't that mean- Oh right, it was like *Karate Kid* all over again.

Instantly, I directed my right leg up quickly, the sudden 180 degree kick caused the bell to chime loud and clear. Walt gave an approving nod.

"Your claim on having flexibility is proven, as well as having good balance," he said. "Your next test won't be so easy."

*He calls that easy?* I thought. I was only one of the few kids at camp who could do what I just did. The next tests must be quite a challenge if that was considered simple.

Lynetta placed a hand on my shoulder to guide me to the back of the room while Walt rearranged the stack of boards I just saw. I was soon standing in the middle of four corners with bronze automatons standing guard in each. She went into a smaller room and tossed me a long 3 foot celestial bronze spear. I looked at the object questionably.

No sooner did I get the spear in hand that Walt suddenly called out.

"INCOMING!"

I widened my eyes as I saw a 3 by 6 inch wooden board flown straight at me by an automaton. Boards launching out from its chest every 5 seconds. Instantly I moved the spear in front of me- the wooden board that nearly hit my face clattered to the ground. I didn't have a moment to question as I saw yet another board thrown at me. I reacted: moving my body to swerve or attack the incoming boards. The automatons were tossing wooden boards in front and behind me every 5 seconds. Of course, by the end of this 'test' my body now sported light bruising when I didn't dodge or attack fast enough. I spun the spear as the last board was thrown at me, and the loud clang of the bronze spear hitting the ground could be heard amongst my panting. Overall, I was able to dodge a majority of the boards unscathed. Walt stared blankly at me, as if analyzing what he should do next to beat me up.

"Put a *blindfold* on him, Lynetta." Walt ordered. I must have appeared stunned when Walt rolled his eyes. "If you thought that was all there was, then you are *dead wrong*, Hunter. Let's see how you do without your eyesight."

I positioned myself again, this time with a black cloth tied around my eyes. I couldn't see a thing. I heard the *swoosh* of a wooden board. I tried to dodge but instead I got hit square in the chest. I grunted; my body lowering involuntarily as I got hit hard in the back. I held the stick out blindly, swerving it in a vain attempt to keep any of the boards from hitting me. I remembered where the automatons were positioned, so I should have been able to dodge just by memory. However, I nearly yelled out in pain when one of them slammed against my jaw, my hand automatically went up to soothe it. My hand felt liquid.

"The automatons ain't stationary!" Walt's voice echoed through a sound system. I remembered how
he was standing in another room, looking through a glass screen. "Don't dodge based on what you saw. Hone your instincts!"

I forced myself to calm down, to relax despite the boards still aiming at me. I gritted my teeth as I tried to pick up where the four automatons were moving. I tried to tone out the sounds of wooden boards slamming against me. I stood still, and just listened.

*Creak, creak…*

The automatons must be wired to move a certain way. I could tell that one of them was less than 2 feet away, likely behind me.

*Creak, creak, creak…*

Another must be at my right…about 3 feet away from me. I could hear the exhaust of fumes as the automaton aimed. I could hear the metallic scuffling as each of them quickened or lessened their pace around me. I remained still for a moment, trying to hear where the nearest automaton was, and once I heard the scuffling I attacked.

Ignoring the boards still hitting me, I swung the spear midway- the slicing of metal apparent as the severed automaton started making wheezing noises. I spun the spear above me and instantly attacked the next automaton once I heard a thud. For the remaining two, my hearing picked up fast creaking on both my left and right, boards aiming at my side. I staggered before I knelt down quickly and cut down both automatons at its roots. A moment later, there was a loud, echoing crash.

However, it wasn't over. Walt must have wanted to surprise me. I heard breathing, a faint heartbeat, and the sound of sharpening metal behind me and quickly tried to defend. Lynetta gave a quiet gasp as she pushed her weapon against mine.

Before the fight could get too serious, Lynetta said, "you may now stop, Seth."

I lowered my attack immediately, my figure wobbly as I lifted a hand to take off the blindfold. I looked down and finally noticed all the visible gushes and dark bruises on my skin. I felt a warm liquid going down the side of my face. Walt gave an approving nod.

"Not bad, Hunter," he muttered. "Not bad at all."

I gave a standard bow, the spear tuck behind me. "Thank you, sir."

Walt huffed. "Get him some ambrosia and nectar, Lynetta." Lynetta proceeded to do what he said. As I sat down on one of side benches with a towel Lynetta gave me, flinching when I pressed too hard, Walt continued to scrutinize me, making me feel slightly uncomfortable.

"You did well, Hunter. I must admit that no student before you has managed to catch on so well at the end. Your skill with a spear is as proficient as you claimed last night. Your endurance and level of pain tolerance even surprised me. Some of my previous students were forced to give up halfway."

"Thank you, sir," I said quietly.

Walt gave a brief nod. "Tell me- how did you target Lynetta in the end? What gave her away?"

"It was her breathing, sir."

"Her breathing?" Walt exclaimed.
I nodded. "Yes sir, and her heartbeat." Walt grew silent for a moment, taking what I said into thought, before looking at me with apparent curiosity.

"Interesting…so I take it that you have a sharp hearing ability?"

"Um, yes sir." I said a bit unsteady.

"Is this a special ability of yours, Hunter? Being a child of D-Artemis?"

"Yes sir," I said.

"Do you have other special abilities that I need to be aware of?" Walt muttered. Before I could answer, Walt stopped me. "No, don't answer that. I'll leave that to Lynetta. I'm sure she will enjoy figuring you out." Then, Walt eyed me amusingly. "Though, I can tell one of those would be regeneration."

Instantly, I placed a hand on my jaw. Seeing as how it didn't sting anymore, the bruise and scrap must have healed completely, though the rest of my body still ached. Walt appeared amused.

"Looks like you might be worth my time, though it is still too early to tell." Walt said. "Wait here- I still have a couple more tests for you to do Hunter. So don't get all arrogant with a little praise!"

I groaned as Walt gave a chuckle before he went to prepare the next test.

-o-

When Lynetta finally returned and I had some ambrosia to eat, the rest of my body was up and ready to go. The next few tests measured my skill in knife throwing, speed, and swordsmanship. I thought I did pretty well on the first two. Knife throwing was like archery in a way, only with knives. Walt tested my speed by having me run a couple race tracks and going through the jungle gym, in which he also took note of my climbing skill and flexibility. As for that last one, it was obvious that I would flunk it. Walt exaggerated that my swordsmanship was so bad that even his (deceased) German Shepherd Alexander could beat me with a sword in its mouth. I told him that since his dog was dead, he couldn't back up that claim. Walt only narrowed his eyes at me, looking offended by my logic.

"How is it that you could handle two knives or daggers just fine, but with a single sword, you are at a loss?" Lynetta questioned me.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I tried improving, but somehow the weight of the weapon and the positioning didn't feel right."

"A problem with balance and weight…" Lynetta muttered aloud. She jotted down some notes on her clipboard. "We'll have to fix that eventually. Swords are a common and favorable weapon. It will be a huge disadvantage for you if you didn't even master the basics." I only nodded glumly, not looking forward to that at all.

Finally, I was tested in archery. This one, I definitely had a lot of confidence in. Like Camp Half Blood, Walt's archery range differed in distance and size. However, the targets also moved about mechanically and at different speeds. Plus, the targets weren't always the standard diagram.

I was doing well in the beginning: I kept making perfect shots all the way. Later, Walt asked me how many arrows I could notch at a time, and I answered three. Afterwards, he upped the difficulty by moving about three different targets at once, and I was expected to do perfectly like I had done before. Seeing as how I was still unchallenged, Walt brought out different monster diagrams. This time, I aimed for the monsters' head, heart, or any vital spots indicated. Except, when he brought up a
I hesitated and the arrow missed the intended mark by inches.

I noticed Lynetta looking up from her clipboard with raised eyebrows. Walt only stared at the mistake knowingly, almost as if expecting me to miss.

"Hunter..." Walt started. I braced for the next question, no doubt asking me why I failed, but instead I got a different response. "What makes this image so different from the rest?"

"It's a human poster, sir."

"Exactly. It is a poster." Walt said. "Only a poster. Yet when the poster takes on the image of a human instead of a monster, you hesitated. Do you know why that is?"

"Why is that, sir?"

"You lack killing intent." Walt answered. "I know you must have killed numerous monsters before, so you must have some degree of intent, but for a regular human...you don't have any, which is to be expected for someone of your age, I suppose."

"Sir, why would I need to, um, have killing intent for a mortal?" I questioned. "Mortals don't have anything to do with this."

"You would be surprised." Walt said narrowly. "Weren't there mortal interference during that time you and your buddies took on the Titan Atlas?"

"Yes, there were." I said, remembering what Percy and Grover told me. "But they were hardly aware of the real situation!"

"True, but their ignorance of the situation hardly makes them less of a threat." Walt pointed out snidely. "Would you jeopardize a mission for the sake of an ignorant mortal?"

"I won't kill innocent people." I said firmly.

"Fine," Walt said. "That's good. However, if you knew that this mortal man is responsible for heinous crimes? Perhaps if he wasn't so innocent—and would you become more inclined to do so?"

What was Walt going with this? Killing mortals...I knew some mortals were better off dead than alive, but being the judge of their actions didn't seem right.

I said quietly, "how am I suppose to know if this man is innocent or not? Even if he isn't, I don't think I have any right to take his life."

"Taking the ethical approach, huh?" Walt mused. Then, he sighed. "I'm not telling you to go out there to massacre every mortal you see, Hunter. Rather, I hope you won't ever encounter such a situation. But unfortunately for your line of work, mortals are often too involved with monsters and Titans. In the past, some of my students ended up failing and risking their own safety for the sake of the corrupted, simply because the corrupted turned out to be human."

"What you must understand Hunter, is that many of those mortals willingly join our enemies' cause, ignorant or not." Walt said. "Their reasons for doing so vary. Whether it's money, power, etc. there are times when it is inevitable that mortals must die for the greater cause. The missions that the gods and I send you will be of the highest priority, and if the safety of those mortals jeopardizes that...I cannot have you getting second doubts."
I didn't answer. My mind was still trying to process what Walt had told me, and somehow, I found myself agreeing with some of his points, only because it was…logical. The mission came first. It wasn't like Walt encouraged killing, more like he didn't want me to risk compromising the missions if it came down to it. But not saving a human being, especially when I had the ability, the idea of it left a bad taste in my mouth.

"Take a short break, Hunter." Walt said, gathering up his things and gesturing to Lynetta to follow him. "You still have one final test left before I can evaluate your skills. I will be expecting you to be with Lynetta in the kitchen afterwards to prepare lunch."

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

-o-

In no time at all, I was back here, this time dressed in a light sleeveless shirt and gym shorts. For my final skills test, I was informed that I would face off against Lynetta. I knew that I wasn't going to win against a veteran demigod like her, but Walt wanted to see how I would do against a stronger opponent.

When Walt finally came down from his workplace, he had on spectacles with different lenses and lasers on the side, the lenses acted as magnifiers that allowed Walt to pinpoint and analyze the fight at different angles and perspectives.

"Have you always been this scrawny, Hunter?" Walt exclaimed when he saw me. "What is it exactly that you Greeks eat at this camp? You have so little muscle!"

"The dryads and nymphs prepare our meals, sir." I answered, trying not to show any offence. I knew I didn't have a large frame like one of the Ares or Hephaestus kids, but I was never called scrawny.

"Nature spirits, huh? No wonder. We'll make sure to build you up while you are here." Walt muttered.

I had taken out Nightwalker and Darkhacker, my choice of weapon. Lynetta had given me the option to choose whatever weapon I was most comfortable with. Lynetta had taken out a single weapon- a two and a half foot long deadly looking katana, a Japanese style sword with a steel core and imperial gold edges. Her katana could harm both monsters and mortals alike.

Lynetta eyed my daggers with interest. "You never mentioned your daggers were made of Stygian Iron, Seth Hunter."

I blinked, momentarily surprised. "They are? But Stygian Iron is from Hades, isn't it? Dipped in the River Styx?"

She nodded. "It is. In the past, Stygian Iron weapons are usually owned by children of Hades, and have the ability to absorb the essence of its enemies with every hit. It is rare that other demigods possessed them, seeing as how the properties of this material is meant to enhance a child of Hades' abilities. Don't tell me you never investigated the properties of your own weapons?"

My face reddened. "The first time I had them, I was told that they were nameless and the creator was unknown. It was only until Ares noticed them in my possession that he bothered to tell me the names and their history."

Lynetta only gave a curt nod as she brandished her weapon. "I see. Now prepare yourself!"

She suddenly charged, her sword raised and about to slash me in two when I quickly sidestepped her
I raised Nightwalker as she aimed again, the weight of both her hands on her weapon caused me to quickly move my body to the side and Darkhacker towards her lower body. Lynetta responded by moving her katana to defend my side attack while slashing just as fast to defend my overhead onslaught, giving me a long diagonal cut on my lower arm.

I winced as I was forced on the defensive. Her katana had a longer reach, and it was lighter than most swords, which helped double its speed and rate of accuracy. I noticed how her upper hand pushed more force into the weapon, while her lower hand controlled its speed and versatility. I continued to dodge as I tried to find an opening. It was when Lynetta raised her katana high up, just about to bring it down with deadly force that I finally found a weak point. I quickly charged head first, lifting one dagger up to defend the upward strike, but just when I was about slash her side, Lynetta brought her knee up and collided it hard against my chin.

My head was in a daze. As I stumbled, Lynetta brought her elbow down on my shoulder blade, knocking me flatly on my chest. Lynetta's katana hovered dangerously over my neck.

"Tell me what you did wrong, Hunter." Lynetta said as she lifted her katana away. I got up shakily.

"I saw an opening, and I took it." I said, grunting.

"Indeed." Lynetta replied. "However, you did not think it through. You focused only on my katana, and did not take in other weapons at my disposal. If I were your enemy, that carelessness would have resulted in your death."

I didn't say anything. I knew Lynetta was right, but I didn't want to admit it. That foolish move of mine would have killed me. I supposed I was in such a hurry when I finally saw an opening that I didn't consider other counter attacks. My impatience and perhaps my over eagerness got the best of me.

"Always know your opponents' strengths," Lynetta advised. "I'm sure you were aware of my ability in martial arts earlier. Don't assume that the opponent will rely on one style of fighting. If it is a sword fight, one may throw in martial arts or even a hidden dagger in order to have the advantage. Even archery, a long ranged weapon, could be combined with a spear or knife quite effectively if done by an expert."

"So basically, you are telling me to expect anything?" I asked.

"Yes, and that any fight is unpredictable," Lynetta answered. "If you take my advice to heart, I'm sure your current style of fighting will improve for the better."

I stood and gave a slight bow. "Thank you for your advice, I'll be sure to keep them in mind."

Lynetta also gave a bow, standard courtesy after a fight ended.

"Make sure you treat that wound, Seth." Lynetta said. "You wouldn't want it to get infected."

"Yes, of course." I said.

"You are done for today, Hunter." Walt replied. "You passed." Then, he scoffed, unimpressed. "Hardly a surprise. If you couldn't even get past this first simple assessment, you wouldn't be here in the first place. Now before you go, Hunter. Here's your list of chores."

I took the sheet he handed to me and went through the paper once, and gaped. Dusting the library, cooking dinner, sweeping the training grounds...those were only some of the easier ones. "Hold on, just how am I supposed to do all of this today?"
"Find a way," Walt said simply. "If you can handle my exercises, then a couple chores should be a piece of cake."

"What is the point to all these chores?" I asked quietly. I've been dying to ask that question since yesterday. "I could spend all the extra time training instead! I saw your automatons doing the dusting this morning."

Walt narrowed his eyes. "Automatons aren't perfect, and there is more to life than just training till your ass drops dead."

"But that's the point of training!" I argued. "It's so I can prevent myself from getting killed!"

"Then why train?" Walt countered. "Training is all about getting in the line of fire. You risk your life everyday fighting monsters and now there are Titans running loose. If you really wanted to prevent yourself from even the possibility of getting killed, you might as well sit back and watch on the sidelines."

I was in disbelief, was I seriously hearing this from Walt? Was he being sarcastic with me? "You mean, like you? Is that why you don't go out in the open?" Walt stared at me, his face stoic. Somehow, I didn't care if I offended him. What was the point of getting training from a man who wouldn't even step a foot outside his door? Getting in the line of fire...did he even know the true meaning behind those words?!

"I have my reasons for not exposing myself," he said narrowly, "but I am hardly a coward if that is what you are thinking."

"You are only human, Hunter. As strange as that concept may sound to you, all humans die eventually. Do you think training is all there is to surviving in this world? Don't be such a narrow-minded fool. My orders and reasons for giving you these chores aren't as simple as you think. My task is to train you until you reach your full potential, and I am doing just that. If you believe my training methods are too much or too unorthodox- feel free to leave. You know where the door is."

I swallowed. I didn't know what to say to that. Did I really want to lose the opportunity to get stronger over a list of chores? The thought sounded almost comical. Lynetta stood behind me, observing us silently.

"Now why are you still standing around for?" Walt suddenly snapped, "unless you want more on your list?"

I shook my head, mumbling "No sir."

"Then get going!"

I left quickly, not once turning back.

-o-

"He reminds you of him, doesn't he?" Lynetta asked Walt quietly.

Walt sighed. "Yes, he does."

"I'm sure he doesn't blame you for what happened." Lynetta replied.

"I know," he muttered, "which is why I'll do my best with this one. I don't want Hunter making the same mistakes."
"I'm sure you will do fine, Mr. Forger," she answered. "Seth has shown a lot of potential through this first test. He managed to go through most of the exercises in half the average time."

Walt huffed. "It's still too early to tell."

"You said that to me too." Lynetta pointed out.

"That I did." Walt said. "Yet here you are now." He scratched the back of his head. "I'm glad to have you as my assistant, Lynetta."

Lynetta gave a rare smile. "It is my pleasure."
Fatal Flaw

By the time I got in bed, I was exhausted.

I literally spent the whole afternoon trying to finish up my list of chores. After hours of washing the windows, dusting the tables, and cleaning up the training grounds, every part of my body ached with weariness. It also didn't help that Walt Forger was extremely OCD. Even after I made sure to dust every shelf and book in the library for instance, he came in and gave a casual wipe on one of the shelf's undersides. When Walt noticed the speck of dust, he yelled at me for doing a 'half-assed job' and told me to redo the library again. Thankfully, Lynetta still helped me with dinner, and I was soon able to munch down all the food I could stomach.

As for sleep, well, this was when being an insomniac really sucked. Despite how tired I was, I kept tossing and turning in my bed until I more or less given up and decided to do some light reading. It was embarrassing when Lynetta woke me up with my face drooling on the pages of my Biology textbook, my body stiff from sitting at my desk instead of the bed. She apparently let herself in after knocking for who knew how long.

After I finished my first exam, Walt had started to push me into practicing more swordsmanship, which I absolutely hated. For the past few days, Lynetta always managed to get me in a few strikes and knock me upside the head. If it wasn't a fight, I was supposed to slash one of these automated, wooden dummies in half. My failed attempts ended with me getting smacked by the moving dummies or missing the target completely.

"Can you please clarify on this balance and weight issue you have?" Lynetta asked me.

"Well," I started, "it's just I'm always used to having things in both hands. Two things, like a bow and arrow, or my daggers for example."

"What about your skill with a spear or javelin?" Lynetta questioned. "Those are only one item."

"Yeah, but a spear is more lengthy, making it more balanced. Same goes with a javelin, and they are both lighter than swords." I explained. "With a sword, it's like I'm dragging around a huge metal stick."

Lynetta placed a hand under her chin, thinking. "How about this: why don't you try using my katana?"

"Your katana? Are you sure?" I said.

She nodded, as she held her sheathed weapon to me. I took it. The weight was much lighter than I imagined. Before I could use it, Lynetta threw me another sword- a rapier.

"Try using both of these at once." Lynetta said. I paused for a moment, thinking how I could handle two swords when I couldn't even handle one. I decided after a moment to just try out what she said.

Instead of the metal automatons, there were a couple wooden dummies set up. I tried balancing the two swords I had in my hands, the rapier was slightly heavier than the katana, but other than that, the length and feel to the blades were almost the same.

"Now, try slashing this dummy in half." Lynetta told me. "Use whatever methods necessary."

I concentrated, positioning the two swords upright, one in front and another beside me in defense. It
was almost like I was fighting with my daggers instead. With that in mind, when the dummy came up and started to bring down its automated sword hand, I immediately brought the rapier up and swerved its other hand. I quickly brought the katana up and sliced the dummy in two. What I had just done left me stunned.

"H-how did I just do that?" I said to no one in particular. This was the first time that I actually succeeded! Most times, I would struggle bringing the sword up to the speed I wanted, making my movements sluggish and amateur.

Lynetta only smiled briefly. "I simply fixed your little problem. The results are quite exceptional."

"How did you fix it?" I wondered.

"Call it a hutch if you will," Lynetta replied. "I took your problem literally and gave you two 'light' swords. As for balance, you said that you are used to holding two things, so instead of one sword, I gave you two. This is the result."

"Wow…" I continued to stare at the broken down dummy in awe. If I had known my swordsmanship could improve like this so easily, I would have done it ages ago. "I can't believe I never tried this at camp."

"I take it that Camp Half-Blood mostly supplies western style swords?" Lynetta asked. I nodded. "Then it is no wonder you failed swordsmanship until now. Western style swords are often built with thicker blades and heavy guards. They are meant for strength and damage rather than speed, unlike the rapier and katana. Like these swords, your physical prowess is also meant for speed and accuracy rather than strength."

"I'll inform Mr. Forger of your progress." Lynetta continued. "You may put a stop to your swordsmanship practice for now. Mr. Forger has some instructions for you concerning your fatal flaw."

"You mean he's going to help me overcome it?" I clarified, while handing the katana back to Lynetta.

"Yes." Lynetta answered, taking her sheathed katana in hand as she led me to the stairs. I placed the rapier back on the swords rack.

"Do you know how he's going to do it?"

She shrugged. "I have some ideas, but I don't know what Mr. Forger will do. My fatal flaw wasn't emotion, but I'm sure whatever Mr. Forger has in mind, it will be effective."

"I hope so," I muttered.

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"So Lynetta tells me that you made a breakthrough?" Walt asked.

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

We were now in the music room. He was currently beside one of the music stands, placing music sheets neatly while his other hand twiddled the buttons of the radio. There was a grand piano taking up half the space, while on the other side, I noticed guitars, violins, and other string and wind instruments on the walls. There was also a drum set.
"You must be wondering why I asked you to be in here, Hunter." Walt began. "I heard from Lynetta that your fatal flaw is…emotion?"

I nodded, a bit hesitant.

"So it is," Walt muttered, and then he asked, "what experience do you have with music, Hunter?"

"Um, I listen to piano music in my spare time?" I said sheepishly.

Walt raised an eyebrow, "anything else?"

"Not really, but I remember trying to play *Ode to Joy* once. Kayla, a daughter of Apollo, had tried teaching it to me." I added.

Kayla was a music genius. She started playing piano at age 4 and was now considered a prodigy at age 10, and nicknamed the next Mozart (who was also a child of Apollo). She started writing her own music pieces just recently, and she even performed at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Though I was sure that being a child of Apollo influenced her success, I never saw Will or Lee play piano that well.

"But other than that, then nothing right?" Walt said. I nodded, though music was never my forte, I still felt slightly embarrassed by my lack of knowledge.

"You are in luck Hunter…" Walt started.

Oh great.

"I happened to love music to a certain degree, and I believe that learning how to play music will help you in overcoming your fatal flaw," Walt said. "While listening to instrumental music is good and all, listening is never the same as playing the piece. So from this day on, I will be expecting you to be in here at least an hour each day learning how to play the assigned sheets I give you. By the end of the next week, I will test you on how well you play the piece in its entirety."

Okay, so I'd be learning how to play the piano. Other than that time with Kayla, I've never even touched a piano. I let out a mental sigh of relief. It was better than I expected. I thought Walt had something worse in mind, like expecting me to be a music prodigy that mastered like ten instruments.

I really hoped Apollo was right about me having some musical ability.

"Um, sir, if I may ask…"

"What? Speak up, Hunter! Whenever you have something to say, you should at least be confident enough to say it."

"Why music?" I said, louder this time. "How will music help me overcome my flaw?"

Walt looked at me knowingly. "Would you rather I ask you to write down your feelings? Or perhaps talk about your problems and analyze them like some shrink?"

"No sir!" I said quickly. Last thing I needed was for Walt to treat me like a mental patient. "Of course not, but why didn't you chose that way instead? Not that I'm complaining!" I added.

He sighed. "I don't think writing down anything helps a whole lot, that's why. That whole traditional process may benefit some people, but judging from what I know of you, it won't be helpful in your case."
From what I know of you… what did Walt know of me? Did Hermes or Artemis tell him something without me knowing? I felt a shiver go down my spine, suddenly feeling exposed.

"Sir, you still didn't answer my question." I managed to point out.

"No, I didn't," Walt said. "Get started Hunter. These first few sheets help you with the basics. Once you're done with the theory work, I'm expecting you play the last song I assigned perfectly by next weekend. I am also aware of your distant relation with Lord Apollo, so don't think you can get off easy."

Oh crap. If he's expecting me to complain about being pushed too hard, I had one heck of a week of work to do. Besides physical training, chores, and my mortal education, now I had music lessons to worry about. How wonderful.

I was right too. By the time I looked through the stack of assigned music sheets, I nearly choked when I saw the last piece.

"Fur Elise?" I exclaimed, my head getting dizzy just by looking at the scales, and this wasn't the simplified version either. "How in Hades am I supposed to play this by next week?!!"

"What did I say about whining!?" Walt said. "When I say to do it, you do it. The things that Lynetta and I assign you are within your capabilities. Just make sure you go through the pile a step at a time! I've trained Apollo kids before, Hunter. I'm fully aware of your level of musical ability."

"But I've barely even touched the piano-!"

"NO WHINING! Now get to it!" Walt interrupted, before he closed the door behind him.

I stared at the pile of papers in my hand bitterly. A step at a time huh? Easier said than done. Plus, I was still skeptical on how music would help me with my flaw, since Walt apparently didn't want to answer.

With a sigh, I sat down on the piano bench and placed the music sheets on the stand. I lifted the piano cover, and after testing the feel to it, I started to play.

-o-

By the time the day ended, I had managed to get through half the music theory stuff. I still had chores to do, and Lynetta continued to push me hard in our training sessions. When the weekend came around (thankfully the piano thing was for next week otherwise I was screwed), Lynetta started my first tutoring session. She first went over the stuff I was required to read and asked me questions on the topic. Literature was always my favorite subject, but I also discovered that I had a talent for physics, which I caught on easily once I understood the applications, though numbers were a problem. Calculus was alright, but I had the same dyslexia problem with calc as I did with physics, as for biology…

It was a pain in the ass.

Sure Apollo was the god of medicine, and since I was distantly related to him, one would expect that Biology should be second nature to me. I wished that was true. We were going through the cell cycle one time, and memorizing those cell parts and its functions was enough to give anyone a headache. But what I really hated about Biology was the subject itself. When I was glancing over the textbook one night, and my eyes landed on evolution and that whole crappy truth about how babies were supposed to be born, it was like the textbook was taunting me right in the face.
"Why do I have to learn any of this stuff?" I complained to Lynetta, who was currently reviewing biology concepts with me. "I already know the basics of it, and it's not like it will help me much."

Lynetta stared at me, her arms crossed. "Don't you hope to get a job in the future?"

"A job?" I said dubiously.

"Yes, a job." she repeated. "You have to master these concepts so you can get accepted into college, and then get a job. That is what you plan on doing? Camp Half-Blood is only a temporary stage in life. Monsters are a daily occurrence, but they won't be the central thing."

A job. Such a mundane thing, and it never once crossed my mind. I've been so worried over surviving the next year that I didn't think of anything else after that.

"I…I don't know." I said quietly. "I never thought about it."

Lynetta appeared thoughtful. "Well, you must have some kind of dream? What do you hope to be when you grow up?"

It was the kindergarten question, and yet I couldn't answer it. I couldn't believe this was the first time I was actually thinking about this topic. Annabeth always went on about how she wanted to be an architect- no doubt she had her whole career and college path mapped out. Grover had a goal of finding the lost god, Pan. Will wanted to be a doctor and enter med school, while Lee wanted to be a world-class archer. Even the Aphrodite kids had goals of entering the entertainment and modeling industries.

"I don't know." I mumbled. "Honestly, I don't have a clue of what I want to be."

"This is why we are going through these topics." Lynetta said. "It's not only so college will be a possibility, but it's also so we can find out what your interests are. What subjects do you like most?"

"Literature…and physics I guess." I said.

"Okay," Lynetta said. She sat down across from me. "What else? Any hobbies or things you like?"

"I like…archery. That's a given. I also like animals, especially dogs, and kids." I added. Lynetta gave a nod.

"Have you ever thought about becoming a teacher?" Lynetta asked. "Or maybe a veterinarian?"

I shook my head. "No, but those sound interesting."

"Just leave your options open." she suggested. "You said you wanted to survive. It's said, that those who think ahead are most likely to live to see it happen."

"I'll keep that in mind." I said. Lynetta gave a shadow of a smile before she continued the horrid biology lesson.

One afternoon, when I was in the middle of reading through the Greek version of Wuthering Heights, there was a soft knock on the door before I went to get it. Lynetta stood there, fully dressed in the same petticoat and boots I saw her in when I first arrived.

"Put on something warm," Lynetta instructed me. "We will be visiting town."

I blinked. "Town? For what?"
It's been at least a week since I've been here, and it was also the first time I would finally be getting fresh air.

"Your wardrobe is in dire need of changing and filling." Lynetta replied curtly. I blushed. "We will also be getting other things. Meet me outside on the front porch in 10 minutes." With that said, she shut the door and left.

After I put on a sweatshirt and coat, along with my bow and quiver (only because it seemed right), I found Lynetta waiting for me outside with a black handbag over her shoulder. She noticed my weapons, but she didn't say anything about it. I trudged after her in the ankle deep snow, and she finally stopped at the back of the house. She opened a cover of a device on the tool shed. Instantly, the large clearing of snow parted automatically, making large creaking sounds. Underground, I noticed a Silver Toyota Prius, a Jeep, and even a private helicopter.

"You guys have an underground garage?" I said with disbelief as Lynetta opened the doors to the Silver Prius.

"We do need a private space for our vehicles." Lynetta said, as if that was common sense. She unlocked the other doors. "Get in."

I did as she said. Soon enough, Lynetta quickly drove the Prius out of the metal ramp and I noticed how the parted doors instantly closed after her. She tapped on another switch on her cell phone and even the surrounding trees parted, creating a smooth path for the Prius to drive through.

"Did Walt make all of this?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Incredible." I muttered. I wondered if any of the Hephaestus kids could invent any of this. "Why does he need a private helicopter?"

"It's in case our location is jeopardized." Lynetta answered. "We never know when monsters may attack."

"He's kind of paranoid isn't he?"

"Perhaps," she admitted. "But it has kept him alive for this long, which is quite an accomplishment. Most demigods don't make it past their twenties without help."

I took that information in silently. I had always wondered why the camp contained so many young demigods, the oldest only in their early twenties. When I had asked out of curiosity, Chiron only gave a sad glance, and told me that many had moved on outside of the camp once they entered college to pursue careers and families. He never mentioned how most of them died, but I kind of guessed. Even so, I still felt a slight shock when my thoughts were confirmed.

"What exactly does Walt do for a living?" I questioned. "He said he was a hacker?"

Lynetta kept her focus on the road. "He is, and quite a successful one. You can say living expenses are at the bottom of Mr. Forger's list of worries."

"But isn't his job illegal?"

She shrugged. "He calls it capitalism. He creates and sells the anti-virus programs to help fight off his creations. Quite an ingenious cycle wouldn't you say?"
I stared at her. "Y-you're not serious?"

"It's one way to make money."

She pulled her car into a half empty parking lot at Wilmington Square. There were a couple of civilians present, most of them looking through the store windows. The sign 'Welcome to Wilmington! Population: 12,293" had half-faded red paint. As I got out of the car, a chilly breeze swept by, freezing me to the core. The place looked almost dead. There were a couple of bare trees, with ravens perched on nearly every branch. Somehow I felt like the ravens were watching my every move.

"Come along," Lynetta called. The Prius gave a quiet chirp as she locked the doors. "I know of a good department store around here."

-o-

The next few hours were any guy's nightmare.

I never understood how girls could take hours shopping around an outlet and come out with only a couple things. At camp, I would hear the Aphrodite girls gossiping about their rendezvous at the mall, like it was something worth talking about it. Percy would mention the horrors of going clothing shopping with his mom. Though Lynetta was unlike any woman I've met, she was still a girl, and now I knew first-hand what 'horrors' Percy was talking about.

"What is it with you and baggy, dark clothing?" Lynetta demanded. "Be honest with me Seth- Do you lack fashion sense? I'm starting to think you do."

"Ha ha, very funny," I said while inside the men's changing room for the 100th time. So far the only clothes that we've decided to get were the ones Lynetta chose."It's hardly my fault that you have to nick-pick apart the clothes that appeal to me! And what in Hades is this?!" I was looking at a tight designer shirt with bright neon colors. Oh gods, this was going to make me stand out so badly. "This isn't my style!"

She huffed uncharacteristically, and tapped her foot impatiently outside the changing room. "Your 'style' is no style at all! Just wear what I throw you! Now are you done yet?"

I exhaled deeply as I forced myself to wear the clothes she gave me. The emotionless, stoic Lynetta was starting to sound like an impatient, bossy daughter of Aphrodite- devil's incarnate.

I finally stepped out, wearing a tight fitting light collared shirt, jeans, and Converse shoes. I had my arms crossed, demonstrating my defiance. Lynetta only nodded approvingly.

"We are getting them," she said at once. I rolled my eyes, but I didn't protest. Arguing with Lynetta or any child of Athena got me nowhere.

"What is the whole point of me being here when you're the one making the choices?" I grumbled.

"So I can get the right size." Lynetta snidely pointed out. "I don't see why you are so against my choices. These clothes fit you nicely, not to mention it makes you very attractive."

"But I don't want to attract." I protested. Why couldn't Lynetta understand? I hate attention. It brought you nothing but bad luck and unwanted danger.

"Go change, Seth." Lynetta said, placing a hand to her forehead and mumbling teenagers. "I have some orders to pick up on the way before we go back to Mr. Forger's."
We went outside. I had a couple bags in each hand as Lynetta headed down the aisle towards the next destination- a delivery store. I waited a couple minutes before she finally came out with some cardboard boxes, the sign 'DANGER' on every side of the boxes.

"What's in there?" I asked.

"Some things for Mr. Forger to use, nothing to be concerned about." Lynetta said dismissively. I only appeared suspicious but I didn't say anything else.

We were just about to load our stuff into the Prius' trunk when it happened. The ravens that were perched on the trees let out a piercing noise so loud that I had to cover my ears due to pain.

In one formation, the ravens swooped down in a unified arc towards Lynetta and me. I quickly shoved the things into the car before I notched my bow and arrows at the ready, flinching as the birds tried to bite into my flesh.

*Stymphalian birds*...I thought morbidly. My first encounter with those things was during the chariot race in my second year at camp. A bunch of annoying ducks.

They kept circling us. All I could do was try to knock them away with my arms, which didn't do anything. The black swarm clouded my vision, and archery was no good at this range. They just kept coming and coming. It was until I heard loud gunshots that the birds backed away.

Lynetta had taken out a rifle, and she just shoved in another magazine from her handbag, and shot rapid rounds of gunfire as the birds flew away. Soon enough, with me helping her with my arrows, the flock of Stymphalian birds were dealt with. Lynetta looked slightly battered. There were some cuts on her hands and face.

"Get in." she told me, her tone urgent. I nodded quickly. Once we were settled in, Lynetta stepped on the gas and the Prius sped out of the parking lot quickly.

Before I could question what happened back there, Lynetta spoke first.

"The other monsters are not far behind," she told me. "Those birds are always the first to attack. We must reach Mr. Forger's residence before they catch a whiff of our scent."

"Your rifle..." I managed to say. "I thought mortal guns didn't have an effect on monsters."

"These are custom made." she said, "Mr. Forger made these with celestial bronze and imperial gold."

"Just like Dr. Chase..." I said aloud. She looked at me questionably. "Dr. Chase is my friend's dad. He said he once melted the celestial bronze weapons my friend had and fashioned them into airplane bullets."

She nodded curtly. "Mr. Forger uses the same tactic, only he already has the celestial bronze in malleable form. He gets a steady supply each year from his father."

"Will I get to practice with these weapons?"

"At a later date," Lynetta said. She slowed the vehicle down visibly, going at 60 mph instead of 80. "You will have to first master the traditional weapons before handling the modern ones."

When we finally arrived at Walt's, Lynetta parked her Prius underground once more as the ramp was lifted upward. We were briefly surrounded in darkness, before Lynetta pressed something, and fluorescent lights came up. I followed her quietly with bags in hand into an elevator shaft. She
pressed the third floor, and the doors opened to reveal a hallway inside the Tudor home.

"Get cleaned up," Lynetta ordered. "There is ambrosia in the kitchen if you need it. I'll have to tell Mr. Forger to put up the Misty Cloak."

"Misty Cloak?"

"Just extra precautions in case any monsters trailed us," Lynetta replied. "I doubt it, but it doesn't hurt to be careful." Then, she turned a left and disappeared from my vision.

I stood there silently for a moment before I dragged the bags upstairs to my room, pondering over when I could get the chance to start marksmanship.

-o-
After that shopping fiasco at Wilmington Square, Lynetta and I didn't make any trips outside the house for a while. She said it was best to lie low for a couple days, much to my disappointment. I understood the implications, but I was always the outdoorsy type, so being stuck inside the house made me less energetic.

Meanwhile, my swordsmanship training has reached an all time high. I was actually hitting the targets for once, and I was finally getting the feel of the blades. Like knives, swords were an extension of your body. As long as you were willing to cooperate and move with the weapon, fluidity became second nature. I was never able to experience that feeling at camp. I always heard about it from Percy and Luke, before he betrayed us. Never did I imagine to experience the feeling myself. Since mastering swordsmanship was still relatively new to me, I relished every victory I got over the automatons. Of course, due to my ambidextrous nature, I had to go from two swords to one. Lynetta taught me the gestures and movement used when using only one sword, which were starting to sink in by the time the next month ended.

As for my fatal flaw training, I actually managed to play Fur Elise right on time. Once I understood where the notes were, and what the symbols and instructions meant, all I had to do was play the notes together in synchronized motion and I was good to go. Somehow, my mind seemed to be taking in the music lyrics piece by piece before putting sense into them.

When I played the piece in its entirety, perfectly I might add, Walt appeared displeased.

"What is this, Hunter?" he asked me.

I was confused. "What do you mean, sir? I played the piece."

"If I wanted the piece to play on record or by one of my automatons, I would not have asked you to play it." Walt said narrowly.

"What's wrong with how I play?" I protested. "I got the notes correctly! Surprisingly! I did everything the sheets instructed."

"What he means is that you lack emotion," Lynetta answered as she came in. "It appears you don't have any spirit or energy. Your playing, though perfect, seems dead."

"I thought we were trying to get rid of my emotion," I replied. "Not do the exact opposite."

Walt sighed, appearing exasperated. "I never said that, Hunter. Emotions can't just disappear. That feat would be impossible."

"I don't get it. What is the whole point of this music stuff?"

"First, you must understand your fatal flaw." Walt began. "Emotions aren't a light thing that one can be rid of easily. You can try suppressing them, but that will just leave you with unnecessary stress and eventually that stress blows up. Judging from what I was informed about, you appear to have an excess amount of emotions. So much that they influence your decisions and judgment. Am I correct?"

"Yes, sir," I muttered, "but if I'm not supposed to suppress them, then what am I suppose to be doing?"
"Simple," he said. "I want you to transfer them out."

I stared at him. For a moment, his words appeared to make no sense. Transfer them out?

"Isn't that kind of the same thing as getting rid of them?" I questioned.

"No, since the emotions are still there," Lynetta answered instead. "You only released them into a different medium, which in this case would be the songs."

"Have you ever wondered why certain songs make you feel happy or sad?" Walt asked. "I won't get into the psychology details, but it is the artist who transfers his or her emotions into the songs in order to make audiences feel a certain way. This is why listening is different than making the piece. Listening allows the emotions of the creator be transferred to you, while creating the piece is the exact opposite."

"Okay, so what you are trying to tell me... is that I have to transfer my emotions into these songs." I said.

Lynetta nodded. "Yes."

"I still don't see how that's helping me." I said. "How is playing music and transferring my emotions over helping me overcome my flaw? You said it's impossible to get rid of emotion, I get that. But how is playing music going to improve me for the better? I doubt I could just run up to a piano in the middle of a battle when I'm feeling too emotional."

"Playing music clears the mind," Walt told me. "I'm a hundred percent certain that if you play Fur Elise the way I asked you to, you will get what I mean. As for using music for your own personal convenience, we'll discuss that later on."

"Now I want you to practice Fur Elise again this week, correctly this time," Walt ordered. I stifled a groan. "Adding on to that, you will also start learning how to play Greensleeves."

"Hey, isn't that piece on a whole other level-!"

"Don't start this with me, Hunter," Walt said with a threatening edge. Reluctantly, I shut my mouth and turned my focus to the sheets once more.

-o-

During a typical morning here, after changing into sweats and preparing breakfast for Walt, Lynetta, and myself, I would go down to the Training Room and run on the treadmill for roughly half an hour before practicing my punches and kicks. If I still had time left over, I would either be in the music room practicing or upstairs reading the assigned chapters and questions before Lynetta called me for a sparring match.

However, this morning was different. It was now my first month anniversary since I've been under Walt's tutelage, which meant I would be attempting my second exam today. The doors to the training room were shut as Lynetta and Walt stood at the foot of the stairs. They looked up when they noticed my arrival. I had on protective pads and armor.

"This exam and the ones that follow will differ drastically from the first test," Walt said with arms crossed. "This exam will focus on certain aspects of your abilities rather than all of them, and will mirror situations that a demigod can encounter out in the real world. You will have a time limit of twenty minutes. No more and no less. You will see a screen with directions once you enter through these doors. This time, your weapons are provided for you. You will see them on your right when
you enter. If you can't complete the assigned task within the time limit, then you have failed the exam."

I only stood there silently, taking in the information quietly, committing them to memory.

"Are you ready, Hunter?" Walt asked.

I nodded firmly. "Yes, sir."

"Good luck," Lynetta said quietly as I walked past. I gave a sideways nod before I pushed open the doors.

There was a piercing white light as I entered, and as promised, there was a holographic screen above me. The rules were plain and simple:

DESTROY ALL 10 FLAG POLES

I quickly ran to my right to find my weapons. There was only a pair of sheathed katanas waiting for me on the stand. That was all.

So this was what Walt meant when he said only certain aspects of my skills were tested. I chuckled briefly before strapping the swords to my back. It was so like Walt to focus on my weakest point. I quickly snapped out of those thoughts, the clock was ticking.

It was only when I finally charged straight into the training room that I noticed the whole scene change. No longer were there any glass chambers holding the different equipment and exercises. Instead, they were replaced by mountainous terrain and rocky paths. The whole place has darkened considerably. I noticed many dark caverns and caves that lacked any source of light. I quickly spotted the first flag pole on top of a mountain top and headed there quickly, my legs straining to reach the speed I wanted. Once I reached my destination, I unintentionally activated a switch. I noticed the ground parted to reveal one of Walt's metal automatons, armed with dual swords of its own.

I clenched my teeth as I reached for my own swords. Of course the flag poles wouldn't be defenseless. Once I got them in position, I quickly lunged for the automaton. The machine clashed its weapons against mine systematically. I quickly did away with it as I made an open slash- severing its head from its body. The flag pole came soon after.

That's one down, I thought as I kept pacing myself. I slid down the side of the rocky slope as I saw another flag pole on ground level. As the automatons were in the process of appearing, I sprinted past them and slashed the flag pole first before heading towards another one. I didn't have the time to deal with all these automatons. Unless it was necessary, I would leave the automatons alone and focus on finding the other poles.

After the next few minutes, I had managed to get every pole that I saw: A total of 6 poles. There were 4 more left. I was betting that the last four were secluded in the caves. I had managed to get a couple bruises and scrapes from climbing and sliding down the steep slopes. The number of automatons present was also a pain since they were annoying blockades. They were easy to be dealt with, due to their moderately slow pace, but it was time consuming. Last I checked, I believed I had only 8 minutes left.

After taking down another automaton, I reached a cave entrance. It was pitch black, but my night vision and sharp hearing gave me warning as an automaton swerved its sword hand at me, narrowly missing my neck by inches. I backed up as the automaton moved towards me, its weapons pointed.
Just before it could strike me from above, I had already lowered myself below its waist and slashed through its engine. I quickly ran for cover as the automaton self-destructed. I ran deeper into the cave, finally finding one of the flag poles and doing away another on the way. The automatons from below were making their way up. I had to find the last two before they do.

The next cave was on top of a nearby hill. I paused to analyze my surroundings. After taking down the two in the cave, I had roughly only 4 minutes left. I wouldn't be able to make it if I took the time skidding down and climbing. There was only one option if I wanted to succeed.

I slowly backed away as far as I could, took a deep breath, before making a mad dash. I felt gravity threatening to weigh me down as my whole body soared in mid-air. Soon, my feet slammed against the hard rocky earth as I made it to the other side. I picked myself up, hissing in pain while doing so. I ran into the cave, dodged the planted automaton and cut down the pole behind it before making my way out.

Now where was the last flag pole?

I looked around in frustration, not seeing it. There were no other caves. I heard whirring noises before I side-stepped the ambush from the cave automaton. By doing so, my eyes had coincidentally noticed the last flag sitting right on top of the cave, completely isolated and appearing defiant.

I was just about to start my climb when the automaton slammed its metal fist into my abdomen, catching me by surprise. I grunted as pain shot up in my body. I narrowed my eyes in sheer frustration before I lopped off the automaton's arm and used my second sword to stab it straight through. I yanked the katana out roughly as I made the painful climb to the top.

Now that my side had been struck (due to my carelessness), it felt like hours trying to get to the top. Once I cut the stubborn flag pole down, a loud resounding alarm came on.

Instantly, all the automatons that were struggling to reach me stopped moving, their lights dying out. The lights also came back on as Walt and Lynetta walked through the front entrance. For a moment, I feared that I didn't make it in time. When I saw Lynetta's approving nod, I let out a sigh of relief.


At that, my body slumped down to my knees, my breathing raspy and uneven. I could feel coats of sweat and dirt on my skin.

I had made it in time.

"Lynetta will see to your injuries," Walt yelled from below. "I'll allow you to have the rest of the day to get yourself cleaned up."

I only nodded wordlessly, my mind still trying to grasp what had just occurred.

-o-

I didn't do much for the rest of the day, and for once, I was extremely glad I had a break.

There were no chores for me to do, no training sessions I had to attend, and I was too tired to hit the books or the music sheets. Walt later told me that he always allowed the student a free day after he or she completed an exam.

_Treat it as a reward for success_, he had told me. I nearly scoffed. He had a point, but it was a strenuous one.
If this was the level of the second exam, I could only imagine what the third exam would be like, and the one after that, and the one after that.

No wonder so many of his students had failed. If it weren't for my night vision and sharp hearing advantage, I probably would have gone overtime myself trying to search for those poles in the caves. I wondered how Lynetta did it. Were her exams the same as mine? How different were they? How well did she do?

I was lying on my bed as I thought through these things. I rubbed my temple absentmindedly before stretching. The bruises were already fading away, and the small cuts were barely visible. Thank goodness I had high regeneration. If there was anything I like about my abilities, it was definitely the healing factor. Fates knew how many times it had saved my life.

I closed my eyes, though it was only supposed to be brief, I found myself fast asleep. For once, my insomnia decided to keep itself at bay.

-o-

After a pleasant nap and a surprisingly good night's sleep, I was at full strength and ready to do whatever Walt and Lynetta assigned me. The following week went by quickly with me having my hands full with new homework, chores, and training exercises.

It was two weeks after my 2nd exam that she decided to drop by Walt's doorstep.

I was in the middle of kitchen duty when I heard the doorbell ring. I frowned as I placed the dishes back and took off my cleaning apron. Guests were nonexistent here. Right before I reached the handle, I felt the heavy aura of a deity behind the door. I placed a hand to my chest, trying to breathe properly again as I straightened myself.

I opened the door, seeing exactly who I expected. The goddess of the hunt stood there quietly, a small smile emerged on her face when she saw me. She appeared to be around Lynetta's age.

"Lady Artemis," I said, swallowing uncomfortably. "I wasn't expecting you here."

"It was a last minute decision," she said. "I apologize if my presence here has induced such shock…?"

I shook my head briefly. "N-no, I'll tell Walt you are here."

I let her in as Lynetta just came down the stairs, her face giving away a brief hint of surprise before she bowed. "Lady Artemis, it is an honor to see you here."

Artemis replied, "I take it you are responsible for Seth's training here, Lynetta Lin?"

"Yes, my Lady, Seth has shown good progress since he's been here."

"I'm glad," she said. "Keep up the good work. Is Walt Forger present?"

"He is. If you like, I'll take you to him." Lynetta offered.

"That would be appreciated." Artemis said, as she followed Lynetta down the hall. I trailed behind them quietly, wondering why Artemis would suddenly appear unannounced.

As always, Walt was in the middle of a project when Artemis, Lynetta, and I came through his door. He had his back to us as he slammed the drill onto the table, cursing under his breath. Walt hated it
when people interrupted his work. He was saying something along the lines of 'This better be important or else-!' before he abruptly stopped muttering when he saw Artemis.

"M-my Lady," Walt started. Well, this was a first. I never saw Walt stutter before. I couldn't help but smirk slightly. "For what reason are you here to see me?"

"I heard from your assistant that my child has been progressing well?" Artemis asked.

"Yes, my Lady. So far that is." Walt said.

Artemis smiled. "That's nice to hear. As for the reason why I dropped by, I am here to propose a mission."

"A mission?" I asked at the door. Artemis gave me a nod.

"Yes, Seth. I would like it if Mr. Forger here would grant you permission to leave with me tomorrow."

"This soon?" Walt muttered.

"Is that a problem?" Artemis said narrowly.

Walt shook his head. "Not at all. However, since Hunter has only been here for two months, I thought the Olympians would wait a while longer before assigning a mission."

"Wait, I don't get it. These 'missions' are a regular thing?" I asked Lynetta quietly as Artemis and Walt engaged in conversation.

Lynetta answered, "Mr. Forger mentioned before during your first week that the gods will be assigning jobs or missions for his students to accomplish. Most of these missions involve an errand of some sort. If a god wanted one of his students to complete the task for them, they would either Iris-MESSAGE him or meet him face to face. Since Iris-Messaging is no longer compatible, Lady Artemis has decided to drop by instead."

"So these missions…they are like Quests?"

"Not quite," she said. "They are similar to Quests in a way that it is a deity assigning them to a demigod. However, unlike a Quest, missions are completed individually, or by a group effort. Not just three people. They are also not law-binding like Quests, so the gods can get involved if they wished."

"In this case, since it is Lady Artemis asking," Lynetta said quietly, "I assume she wants you to aid her hunters in a certain task."

So I would be spending time with the Hunters, a bunch of pro-feminist, man-hating Hunters. What a nice break. Thankfully, I already resolved most of my issues with them last time. I would also see Thalia again. That should count for something. At least she didn't hate guys.

"So how do these missions fall in with Walt's training? Quests take at least a week to complete. I assume missions have the same time span?"

"Missions take the place of exams." Lynetta said. I widened my eyes slightly. "Like Walt's exams, if you complete a mission to the deity's satisfaction. It is considered a pass."

"Did you do missions too?"
"I had a total of four missions. Two of them were assigned by my mother, while the other two were from Lady Hecate and Lord Ares."

"Ares?" I said, a bit suspicious. I still remembered how he duped us during my first Quest. "What did he want?"

"I believe he wanted me to and I quote 'utterly annihilate those stubborn ass griffins, and bring back their heads and gold.' Yes, I believe that is what he wanted," Lynetta recalled. "Those griffins were guarding a very large imperial gold supply in the Appalachian mountains. Since Lord Ares was in conflict with Lord Hephaestus at the time, he wanted a new supply of ore to craft his weapons, just to shun his brother."

"Sounds like him," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

Walt and Artemis had finished their conversation as well. Judging from their expressions, I would be spending some quality time with the Hunters of Artemis.

"Hunter, you will be packing your bags tonight," Walt announced. "No matter what happens, you are to follow Lady Artemis' orders without question. Even if I am not there, I will have my eyes on you."

In other words, *if you screw up this mission, I will know.*

"Yes, sir," I said. I noticed Lady Artemis gave me a brief smile as she looked my way, and I quietly avoided her gaze. After hating her for so long, having this estranged relationship felt odd.

When we were out in the hallway, Artemis requested to talk with me privately.

"You wanted to speak with me, Lady Artemis?" I ignored the way she stiffened whenever I called her that.

"How are you, being here?" she asked. "As you've heard, both Forger and Lynetta see your progress positively. How is it for you?"

She's wondering whether I enjoyed being here or not. Maybe she's asking me how it's like compared to Camp Half-Blood.

I told her. "It's invigorating. I'm reaching new levels of skill while learning many new things all at once. It can be…stressful, but I like it. Walt definitely lives up to his reputation as a strict trainer. His methods are unique, but it serves the purpose well."

"I see," she said thoughtfully, placing a hand under her chin. "Do you feel slightly lonely though?"

"Sometimes," I admitted. "Having Lynetta and Walt for company is alright. I do miss seeing my friends, but this isolation isn't completely a bad thing. Less distractions."

Less reminders of what would happen in two years.

"That's good to know." she said. "Now, what I wanted to tell you about regards my own personal training with you."

"Personal training?" I repeated.

"There is a reason why I asked you to come with me on this assigned mission," she said, "I believe it is time for you to unlock your other more dormant abilities. In order to unlock them, it requires
immense concentration and my direct assistance."

"Dormant…what abilities are they exactly?" I wondered.

She smiled, her silver eyes knowing. I couldn't help but feel a mental shiver whenever she looked at me like that. It's like she knew all of my secrets and wasn't afraid to let them all out.

"For starters, you will be learning how to mask your demigod scent."
Bonding Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After packing my bags last night, and shoving everything I needed into two duffle bags, Artemis, who returned to her 12 year old form, was already at the door when I came down the spiral staircase by morning. Instead of going by chariot (since it was Apollo's shift), Artemis teleported the both of us to her camp site.

Teleporting. Even now I still didn't get the hang of it.

When my mind finally became clear, I noticed that we were in the middle of a forest, it was very chilly, but unlike Massachusetts, there wasn't any snow.

"Where are we?" I asked Artemis.

"We are currently in Maryland," she said. "One of their preserved state forests to be more specific."

So we were in the Mid-Atlantic. That would explain the weather difference.

"So…" I began awkwardly. "Have you um, told your hunters about my arrival?"

"Yes, I have," she said, "do not worry, Seth. My hunters do not hold any resentment towards you. You will be welcomed."

"That's a relief." I said aloud. Inside, I was skeptical. I knew I gained their acceptance, but expecting the whole 'welcome' filled with camaraderie was a bit much. Artemis was also present too. They might be 'welcoming' just for her sake.

I followed behind Artemis closely. I noticed the distinguished cuts on the trees that marked the Hunters' territory as we got closer to our destination. I noticed the pitched silver tents first. There were a couple hunters outside, one of them had just returned from gathering wood and timber for the makeshift fireplace. I recognized Phoebe when she walked out of her tent, stretching while doing so. It looked like she had just woken up.

Of course, another familiar face turned up as well. She was carrying in her prize: a large male deer strung up and dangling under a wooden stick. She and another hunter were carrying it in. When she finally noticed me and Artemis, she widened her electric blue eyes and smiled.

"Seth!" Thalia called out. "You're finally here!" She more or less quickly placed the deer down and proceeded to give me a friendly hug. "How have you been? It's been like months since I saw anybody from camp."

"I've been alright, Thalia. I missed you too." I replied. That was when Artemis cleared her throat abruptly.

Thalia rolled her eyes as she proceeded to let go of me, before saying, "So how's Camp Half-Blood going? Are your cousins doing okay? How about the Hermes Cabin?"

"Uh, I haven't exactly been at camp." I said slowly.

Thalia blinked. "You haven't? If you're not at camp, where have you been?"
"I can't really say." I said quietly, "I kind of owe it to him." Walt never made me swear not to tell anyone about him, but he probably trusted me enough not to mention it.

She only looked at me suspiciously before she decided to let it go. "Fine, whatever. As long as you're fine with it, Moony."

I nodded; ignoring the nickname she still continued to use just to aggravate me. "What are you girls doing?"

"We were just about to prepare deer roast!" Thalia said happily. "Have you ever had deer, Seth?"

"I don't think so," I said. I noticed how Artemis also started to take more interest in our conversation.

"You must try it!" Thalia insisted, "I swear, it's just as good as New York steak."

"I'll take your word for it." I said, chuckling. It's not every day Thalia got so enthusiastic about something, especially food. That was Percy's job. It appeared she's fitting right in with the Hunters. I couldn't help but be glad for her.

It was also a relief that Thalia had gotten over her grief about Luke.

"Thalia," Artemis finally spoke, "I would like it if you help your sisters with the deer you brought in. Seth and I have things we need to discuss before I disclose the mission's details later tonight."

Thalia gave a nod and bowed. "Of course, Lady Artemis."

With that said, Artemis led me around camp, showing me some of the key sites on the way. Some of the hunters gave a brief acknowledgment before continuing whatever they were doing. Blaire reacted by giving me a full glare to the face. She apparently disliked how I had beaten her last time. Judging how she kept cracking her knuckles, I'd bet she's dying for a rematch. I only threw her a casual smirk in response, accepting her challenge. I've learned some new combat moves in the last two months. I would love to try them out soon. I was as eager as Blaire in that aspect.

When we finally arrived at Artemis' tent, her things still arranged the same way, she replied:

"Whenever you are working on mastering your new abilities," she began, "I would like it if you come to my tent to concentrate. My tent is heavily influenced with the Mist, and is capable of silencing out anything from the outside. If you ever…need to be in a quiet place, you are also welcome to be in here."

"Okay."

"Of course, since you will be here for the next few days…" Artemis took out a small silvery roll from a nearby desk and placed it into my hand. "This is your own personal tent. Just roll it out in the clearing and it will set itself up."

I nodded silently, looking at the small, one foot roll in my hand. Wondering how such a small thing became so...big? I shook my head out of it before I thought too much on it.

"My hunters have a certain routine," Artemis told me. "On some days, you will be expected to go out and hunt wild game and bring it back for dinner. Other days, you will be responsible for clearing up the camp or be on a night watch. Too often, there are always some pestering mortals wandering far too close for my liking."

"W-what happens to those mortals?" I asked hesitantly.
"Most of the time, my hunters would use the Mist and guide them away from the camp site." Artemis said quietly, examining my reaction. I couldn't say if I hid my relief well enough. "However, if the mortal turned out to be aggressive, I would have no choice but to add another to my collection."

"I see," I replied calmly. This was Artemis we were talking about, the one who wouldn't hesitate to turn males into jackalopes if she felt like it. Though, since she had another option available, it also showed a bit of leniency? Either way, it's best I didn't aggravate her or any of her hunters here.

"So what new abilities will I let loose?" I asked. "Before, you said I could 'mask' my demigod scent?"

Artemis nodded. She seated herself on her couch in front of me. "Your demigod scent is very much like our godly auras. You are able to tell my aura immediately before I arrived right?"

I shifted uncomfortably, not used to her perceptiveness. "Yes, but I could only tell that the aura is godly, not that it was you."

"As you practice, you will be able to identify the auras and to an even greater extent, you will be able to recognize the demigod auras of your friends." She said. I took a moment to digest what she told me. "The scent and the auras are linked. This is why monsters are able to tell which children belong to which Olympian and so forth. Auras ignited by my father and uncles are among the most vibrant, radiant auras. Children of minor deities are smaller and less attentive."

"So the scent and aura are based on the deity's power?"

"Mostly, but that's not all there is to it." Artemis explained. "For example, Hermes' children are exceptionally skilled and powerful in their own right. But they too, also have the ability to mask their demigod scent since Hermes is a god of thieves. If a child of Hermes mastered this ability, they can easily pass as a regular mortal."

"A regular mortal..." I repeated. I never thought such an ability was possible. If only I mastered this ability in the beginning! The Gorgons in that store would have never noticed me, and I would never have gotten involved so violently. Better yet...

If Artemis was telling the truth, that I could mask my scent to this level... was it actually possible that I could live a normal life if I survived the war?

"It's not that simple," Artemis said quietly, breaking me out of my thoughts. "It takes a lot of concentration to suppress your demigod scent. Even I cannot suppress my godly aura indefinitely."

"You were reading my thoughts, weren't you?" I said a bit accusingly.

"You grew quiet all of a sudden," she said, sounding a bit apologetic, surprisingly. "I was wondering if I shocked you, so I took a look. It's...a bad habit of mine. If it bothers you, I'll promise you that I won't do it without your permission."

"A promise would be nice." I said briskly. There was a brief awkward silence before I went back on topic. "You mentioned how you can't suppress your aura forever?"

She nodded quickly, eager to get back on topic as well. "Yes, it can't be helped. Auras are what define us. The only deities that can suppress them are me, Hermes, and Hades. I believe Athena could suppress hers to a small degree, but I don't think that ability is transferred to her children."

I nodded. "Okay, but you also said how power isn't all there is to defining scent."
Although power is a major component, it also depends on the deity's domain and influence. My father's domain, for instance, is the sky. Obviously, the sky is vast and highly influential, and given his status as the king of gods, his children's scent would be so alluring that monsters within 100 kilometers can pick up on them. But take my aunt Demeter. Her domain is agriculture and as a prominent nature goddess, one would think her children's scent would be just as appealing as a child of my father or Poseidon. Yet in reality, theirs is barely detectable. Do you know why that is?

I thought about it for a moment. Clare was a daughter of Demeter, and I've seen first-hand how dangerous a child of Demeter could be. If it's not power, domain, or influence, could it be...

"Is it…intent?" I said, unsure at first. Artemis smiled. I guessed correctly. "It depends on the demigod's intent, doesn't it? Intent…it also links in with the demigod's awareness. Most kids in the Demeter Cabin are kind of passive. Not as prone to violence or forcefulness. Their passivity is what keeps them hidden."

"That would be correct," she said. "Although Demeter's children do not have the ability to suppress their auras, they don't need to learn this skill because of their gentle nature. Of course, you and I both know that there are exceptions to the rule."

"What I want you to focus on is your intent," she told me. "The less volatile your intent the better. Having a completely blank mind usually helps. What you need to learn is how to clear your mind, no matter what time, place, or situation."

"So that's where the concentration part comes in," I guessed. "How long will this take me?"

She nodded, sitting up. "The time depends on you. Your ADHD is quite a problem in this aspect, but I'm sure that if you are given some guidance and time, you will be able to master it eventually. Once you succeed, then we will focus on your other abilities."

"Other abilities," I echoed. "Like what?"

She shrugged. "Such as shape-shifting into a dog."

"WHAT?" Oh gods, was Percy and Annabeth right after all? I didn't want that stupid nickname to become true…?!?

"Relax, I was joking." Artemis said dryly. I immediately calmed down a bit, but images of me turning painfully into a beast still kept appearing in my head. "You won't be able to shape-shift into anything. It's actually quite insulting how mortals link werewolves with my domain, just because they happen to be active at night. How ignorant can they get?"

"What you will learn is how to command the beasts and wild to your whim. That is the hard part," she told me with a smile before she stood up, and proceeded to exit her tent and leave me alone, her words still on repeat in my thoughts.

It was only after a moment of solitude that I grew startled with a new revelation:

"Artemis just told a joke." I said in disbelief. "She just told a joke."

The world must be ending.

-0-

After setting up my personal tent and belongings for the majority of the morning and afternoon, I joined the other hunters as they grabbed dinner at the center of the fireplace. As I munched into the
deer meat (which tasted amazing), I heard a couple of the hunters close by muttering about Artemis having a gathering of some sort, probably about the mission I was supposed to help out with. Thalia joined me a few moments later.

"So how long are you going to be staying with us?" Thalia asked as she plopped down beside me. A burnt deer carcass was placed above the fire in the middle of the clearing. Many of the hunters have formed their little groups and conversations. Only Thalia decided to sit by me, though some of the others didn't bother hiding their blatant staring.

"It's only until the mission is completed." I told her. "Has Artemis informed you any details about it?"

She shook her head, casually stabbing her fork into the deer meat in her plate. "I was going to ask you that, actually. What did Artemis want with you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It's nothing much," I said. "She wanted to help me unlock these abilities I have. Apparently, they've been dormant this whole time."

"Really?" Thalia said, her interest peaked, "What kind of new abilities?"

I told her.

"Whoa," she exclaimed, "I never knew the gods had these specific auras. I never felt a thing. You didn't mention how you could feel them."

I shrugged. "It never came up."

"Dang…this explains so many things." Thalia muttered; her plate was half-empty by now. "I always wondered how the monsters like know, you know? Do you think I could possibly suppress mine?" I threw her a look. "I know Artemis said that my dad couldn't suppress his, but she mentioned how Annabeth's mom can, even if none of her children can. Maybe if I tried hard enough…could you just mention me?"

"Sure," I said easily. "I'll bring it up next time I talk to her."

"Thanks, Seth."

Then, Artemis suddenly stepped outside her tent and into the middle of the clearing. The side conversation immediately ceased as the hunters craned their necks to listen.

"A few nights ago," Artemis started, her voice easily penetrating the stillness. "Aria and Charlotte reported the re-emergence of Lycaon. It appears that he and his pack are back from Tartarus and it is our duty to make sure he returns to his rightful place. He was last seen patrolling near the Potomac River."

There was whispering as Artemis finally announced the details of the 'mission'. I remained silent however, struggling to remember what I could about this 'Lycaon'.

"We are tasked at making sure that none of the pack escapes us. It will only be more trouble for us if Lycaon reaches any of the Titans and their supporters." She took a moment to land a piercing stare into each person in the audience, lingering her steely, determined gaze on me a second longer before flicking her eyes away. "He will not escape us. Remember to always go in pairs, watch each other's back before taking action. I do not want to suffer any unnecessary losses."

"We will depart at first light tomorrow morning." Artemis announced. "You all may leave. Seth, if I
may have another word with you…”

Thalia and I shared a glance before I got up and incinerated the trash in the fire. The rest of the hunters had done the same thing before going to their tents. I made gestures to talk with Thalia later before I stood before Artemis.

"What do you know about Lycaon?" Artemis questioned.

I hesitated, thinking about it. "His name sounds familiar. Was he once a mortal king by any chance?"

She nodded. "One of the worst I've seen in my life. You may recognize him as the Wolf King."

I did. Now my memories were becoming clearer. According to the myths, Lycaon was privileged in having Zeus as a guest, but because of his lack of faith, he decided to test Zeus by serving him human flesh, flesh that came from one of his own children. Zeus eventually found out and slaughtered all of his sons in anger and turned Lycaon into a wolf man, otherwise known as a lycanthrope.

*It's actually quite insulting how mortals link werewolves with my domain, just because they happen to be active at night. How ignorant can they get?*

"Werewolves." I said with a scoff. "This is what the mission is about? I get to hunt down a werewolf pack?"

"That's right," she commented. "Your thoughts?"

"It's ironic actually," I said with a small chuckle. "Percy and Annabeth always called me a 'werewolf' just for fun. Now, I get to meet a real one, a whole pack even. Are any of the myths true? Do they only transform on a full moon? Or better yet, are there any live vampires around?"

"Most of those myths are false. Lycanthropes do not only transform on a full moon, they don't transform at all. Besides Lycaon, they remain in wolf form for good. However, it is true that they are only harmed by silver weapons. As for these 'vampires'…I believe the right term would be empousai – servants of Hecate. I pray you don't ever encounter them. Although deceptively attractive, they are nothing like what those mortals depict in their films."

"I never liked Twilight that much anyway," I muttered. I only ever heard of that series from Drew and her girly gang. After witnessing the hype surrounding that movie, I decided to give it a try to see what it's about. I didn't last halfway without laughing at the sheer absurdity of it.*

"Do you have any silver weapons?" Artemis asked. I shook my head. "Then it's about time I fix that little problem."

She reached up and placed a hand at the center of my collarbone. Her hand glowed silver and I felt this invisible force entering into me, making me feel slightly light-headed. When she was done, I once again felt…normal.

"What did you just do?" I said quietly.

She gave a small smile. "Why don't you try summoning your bow?" I looked at her in shock. She actually gave me that ability so freely? "Try imagining the bow in your hand and mentally will it to come forth."

I forced myself to turn away from her and closed my eyes. I envisioned myself holding a bow, like whenever I was at the archery range at Camp. Soon enough, I felt something solid in my left hand
and when I opened my eyes, I saw a glowing, 3 foot long silver bow.

It was stunning. I've never seen a more breath-taking weapon. It was like the bow was made out of pure moonlight. The bow felt weightless and the curvature, with its light markings, appeared so elegant that I was afraid the slightest impact would break it to pieces. It was also the same bow I used that night while fighting the giants. It was only now that I appreciated its beauty.

Without saying anything, I tried positioning the bow in attack position. I strung the string back, and a thin, silver arrow materialized. There was fizzing around my fingers, as if the arrow was eager to be released.

I moved the bow quickly to the side and released my attack. The target, an old oak tree, was smashed with a large blast that shook the centuries old tree at its roots. I was smiling without even realizing it.

"What do you think?" Artemis asked.

I let out a breath, feeling very excited as I stared at my bow in awe. "It's beautiful. Thank you, Artemis." I mentally tried willing the bow to disappear, and I felt the familiar void in my hand as I opened my eyes once more.

Artemis only looked away. She appeared sheepish. "You're welcome, Seth. Just make sure not to mentally summon it back and forth too much. It can be very costly on your energy."

I nodded, "Yeah." I couldn't wait to try this new weapon out. It was like getting the toy you always wanted on your birthday.

"Get some rest, Seth." Artemis replied. "As a reminder: we are leaving tomorrow at first light."

With that said, Artemis quickly turned and headed towards her tent. As I was on my way to my own tent, one of the Hunters, Eliza I recalled, looked at me curiously as she poked her head out from the entrance of her tent.

"What got you in such a good mood?" she asked.

"Your lady just gave me the means to summoning a bow." I told her, grinning. She gave a light smile. Somehow, Eliza reminded me of Lucy, with her 'young age' and similar appearance, so I found it easier to get along with her.

"That's nice," she said, and then she smirked. "Have you tried summoning the knives?"

"Knives?!" I exclaimed. She laughed aloud at my expression.

"Good night, Seth," she said. "Try not to keep all of us awake with your summoning, okay?"

I smiled. "I'll try."

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Chapter End Notes

* Not trying to bash on Twilight (okay, maybe I am a little). I even liked Twilight when I first read the books believe it or not (key word being 'books' since I didn't enjoy the
films at all). I really didn't like how the author went with her plot. It had so much potential, and I like the supporting characters Jasper and Rosalie a lot better than the main trio. If the author had chose to focus on them instead of some whiny, clingy teenager (again, it's just my opinion), I'm willing to bet Twilight wouldn't have garnered so much hate and ridicule.
After a night of thrill with my new weapons, Artemis ordered us to pack up and set course for the Potomac River.

It was quite amazing how the Hunters worked. Like what Artemis had mentioned before, there was a certain order that the Hunters followed. All of the silver tents were tightly packed into rolls and shoved into these miniature silver bags that weighed next to nothing. While some of the hunters packed up, others I noticed were using the Mist to hide their demigod scent so no monsters trailed them. By the time the clear up was finished, there were almost no signs of occupation here. Only the leftover soot from the fireplace remained.

After packing up my own stuff, I slung over my old quiver of arrows and bow and tightened the dagger holster around my waist. Even though it was now unnecessary for me to do this, I still preferred carrying the weapons I'd come to value dearly. Sure the weapons weren't exactly light, but the extra ten pounds on my back also gave me a reassurance of safety. I like knowing that I was armed. It always helped me ease my fear and panic whenever I met a dangerous situation. I like relying on myself. I didn't want to trouble others with my problems.

As we moved along the forest terrain, Artemis had started to assign pairs. Each pair was to analyze the tracks as we went along and once we reached the river, the hunters and I would split up and alert the others by these red smoke pistols for any sightings on Lycaon.

I ended up being paired with Eliza, who I learned was the most recent recruit Artemis gained besides Thalia, and one of the youngest. I had hoped to be paired with Thalia, since we had fought together before, but Eliza was fine. It's just kind of discerning how the 'little girl' probably had more experience than I did, and would probably hit me in the gut if I told her to 'stay back' when facing danger. At least it was better than being paired with Blaire. She probably would try to punch me senseless before getting any work done.

We eventually arrived at our destination, but since the Potomac wasn't exactly small, we spent most of the day and the next scavenging for tracks and any possible hint of where the werewolf pack had moved. Thalia and I continued to have friendly conversation, and Blaire still gave me her death glares. Besides Eliza saying something to me the other night, the other hunters didn't make an attempt to talk to me. In fact, they steered clear of me every chance they got. It wasn't like they treated me like the plague, but I believed it's because my presence was foreign and unfamiliar. This was likely the first time a guy had stayed so long with them, and most of them just didn't know how to deal with it. My guess was that they rather avoid the unfamiliarity rather than confront it.

Plus, the fact that I was the male copy of their lady probably irked them more than they would admit. That, I could kind of understand from their point of view. So for now, I was just someone they could greet at a distance, at least until my presence has grown on them.

I also spent a majority of my time trying to mask my demigod scent. Usually, I would be seated on a rug inside my tent with the typical meditation pose, even humming under my breath in order to achieve some level of concentration. But alas, with my ADHD and bunch of worries I had residing in my head, the tactic more or less didn't have the desired effect. My patience was already wearing thin, and I grew more frustrated as the hours rolled by.

Eventually, after two days of failed attempts, I caved in and accepted Artemis' earlier offer.

"Lady Artemis," I called. I was currently standing outside her tent. "May I come in?"
"You may," I heard her say. I lifted the silver cover as I made my way inside.

I found her standing over a table, a map laid and drawn out before her. She had her eyes scrunched up as I stood beside her.

"Any leads?" I asked.

She replied, "Lycaon can't be far from us now. Based on the earlier tracks that Thalia had found, he is at most a day's journey ahead of us. If we make haste, we should be able to halt their progress by tomorrow night."

I gave a nod. "What are your plans?"

She lifted her gaze. "We will take them by surprise. Each of my hunters will be situated accordingly once each of the pack's positions is determined. Despite being stealthy, wolves are noisy creatures. You and I will able to diagnose their positions by their howling. Currently, I will be going with the 'divide and conquer' tactic. The pack will be less of a danger then."

"What about Lycaon?" I said. "Are you going to…?"

She nodded. "That is the plan. However, if I am deterred…you and my hunters are to take on Lycaon two on one at the very least."

"Why can't we take him on alone?" I said. "Is he really that strong?"

"Yes," she said. "Lycaon is not to be underestimated. He is strength, speed, and cunning combined. He also happens to have a healing factor, and annoyingly quick to escape. If you happen to meet him, you are not to attack him alone. Can I hold you to this?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Good," Artemis said. "Now, is that all you came here for? Or is there something else?"

"I, um, need assistance on masking my scent." I said awkwardly, not used to asking for help.

Artemis smiled. "I see. Come sit."

I sat down on her silvery sofa, my arms on my lap. Artemis sat beside me, but left a decent space between us. I wondered briefly whether Artemis was uncomfortable being around me, being a guy and all. Whatever her reasons, I welcomed the gesture. I like my personal bubble.

"What do you need help with?"

"I can't seem to concentrate," I said slowly. "My ADHD is being very bothersome. I can't sit still for long, and my mind is always wandering."

"Have you tried anything to combat these problems?" she asked.

"I tried clearing out a comfortable space in my tent," I said. "I tried silencing outside noises and then I tried not thinking at all…but it didn't work. I either end up falling asleep or my mind starts wandering again."

Artemis appeared thoughtful. "I know I told you that having a clear mind usually helps, but since your ADHD is still being an obstacle….instead of clearing your mind, have you tried thinking about a happy memory?"
"A…happy…memory?" I repeated.

She nodded. "A happy time in your life, a moment when you are calm, at peace, or filled with joy; Positive feelings. Or do you have a place in mind to experience them? Like Camp Half Blood perhaps?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said. I was sure I had quite a few good memories there. "So all I have to do is focus on that memory?"

"Yes."

"How can I tell if I succeeded?" I asked.

"How about you try it now?" Artemis suggested. "I will inform you if I can sense you or not."

"Oh, um, okay," I said quietly.

I took a big, deep breath before inhaling it out slowly. I closed my eyes. The quiet and stillness of her tent also helped a lot. Trying to ignore the fact that Artemis was watching, I tried to focus on a good memory.

I recalled my first day at camp: looking at everything with awestruck wonder. I remembered meeting Grover and Chiron for the second time. I remembered meeting Luke back at Hermes Cabin, but quickly moved on past that. That day was also the first time I ever met Will and Lee, who were now two of my best friends. I felt myself smiling when I recalled how I beaten Will's score by a point, and how Annabeth had scared me half to death.

I chuckled at the thought. Annabeth sure had appeared intimidating. Now, the two of us would laugh and talk as good old friends, with Percy or Grover joining in.

As I recalled these memories, I felt this sense of… tranquility, like there was nothing wrong with my life. It's been so long since I'd ever felt this harmony I never thought still existed within me. I could keep going down the happy memory lane like forever.

I was broken out of these happy thoughts when I felt someone touch my hand. I opened my eyes wearily. Artemis was smiling, her hand grasping mine in a comforting way.

"You did it." she told me. "Your demigod scent went down considerably."

For a moment, I couldn't comprehend what she had told me. It actually went down? I didn't feel any change physically. I never thought I get it so soon after listening to her suggestion.

"It went down," I said aloud. "You…could you still sense me though?"

"I can, but that is only because of my personal link to you and the fact that we are in close proximity." She said. Then, she asked curiously, "You were smiling a lot. Just what memory did you recall?"

"My first official day at Camp Half-Blood," I said.

"I see," she said, "It must have been very pleasant."

I nodded. "It was."

There was a brief moment of awkward silence.
"Um, I think I should go now." I said, seeing her hand still on mine. Artemis grew startled before releasing her hold on me.

"Ah, yes," she said. "Go ahead."

I gave a nod before I quickly exited out of her tent.

-o-

After another two hours of finding distinct wolf marks, Eliza and I returned back to the camp site for a break. Eliza has begun to slowly open up to me a little more, which was a nice contrast to the blank stares I got from the other hunters.

As we entered the clearing, I noticed there were a group of hunters huddling around a laptop. Since Artemis was present, she had the ability to hide the WiFi signal from leaking out to monsters, so surfing the internet was no trouble around here. Thalia was also present.

"What are you girls doing?" I asked curiously. The blond-haired hunter named Charlotte answered.

"We're taking this online Harry Potter House quiz," she said. "Right now, Thalia is taking it."

"Oh, okay." I said as I took a seat across from them. Eliza joined us also. I always liked reading the series when I was younger, though I never took one of the quizzes. This could be interesting.

After hearing a few clicks here and there, Thalia's eyes widened when the results popped up on the screen. "Whoohoo! I knew it! I am a Gryffindor!"

"Well, of course you are," I said. "With your hard-headedness, I be more surprised if you ended anywhere else." Thalia punched me on the shoulder playfully.

"I believe you meant my great courage and determination." Thalia said while reading the page. "As well as my strong sense of justice and loyalty to what I believe in." I rolled my eyes.

"Sure, Thalia," I said. "I suppose that does sound a bit like you."

"So far, I'm the only Gryffindor. Charlotte here is a Hufflepuff, while Elena and Aria are Ravenclaws."

"I want to try!" Eliza chimed in. "I've never taken one before. I want to see what House I end up with."

"Alright Eliza," Thalia said as she handed the laptop over to her. "Give it a shot."

After a few moments of answering questions, Eliza found her answer.

"Gryffindor!" she exclaimed. She and Thalia gave each other high fives.

"Welcome to the House of Lions!" Thalia said before she looked at me with a grin. "Your turn, Seth!"

"If you insist," I said, taking the laptop from Eliza. I might as well humor them, since it looked like Charlotte, Aria, and Elena were starting to relax around me.

Aria asked, "we forgot to do this with Eliza earlier, but what house do you think you will end up in?"
I thought about it for a moment. "I'm not really sure. I think I'm a mix. But my guess would be Ravenclaw." They were the house that valued intelligence, and seeing how I valued my intellect a great deal, I'll probably end up there.

"Let's see if you're right." Thalia said.

I nodded before I clicked on the button to proceed. A series of questions turned up. I raised my eyebrows at the questions. They definitely weren't the kind I was expecting.

**Question 1:** Someone has played a prank on you and caused you public embarrassment. However, they don't mean any harm. What do you do next?

You laugh along with the crowd. You love a good joke.

You get upset and run away.

You start a fight with the pranksters

You pretend all is well and promise to pay them back later.

I looked at the options carefully. This was just like what the Stoll brothers did to me in my first year, and what did I end up doing? I clicked on the last option.

**Question 2:** The school bully, who is three times your size, walks up and demands you to give him money. You:

Give him the money and leave quickly.

Give him the money but you will tell on him later.

Give him a nice fist in the face. Nobody steals money from you.

Let him have his way, but you make sure he gets what he deserves later.

Definitely not the first option, I thought. I wasn't that submissive. I considered option C for a moment before realizing that it was a school bully. Starting a fight would get me in trouble, and option B… that was a reliance on authority. Obviously, if this 'bully' already had a reputation, the teachers didn't do much to stop his actions before. I clicked on the last option.

I answered the next few questions easily, before pausing on the last question:

**You realize that someone you cared about has betrayed you, and is now asking to start over. You:**

You forgive that person. What's past is past.

You give them a punch in the face and refuse their offer.

You decide to forgive them, but you don't want anything to do with them later.

You refuse their offer and laugh at how pathetic they've gotten.

I hovered between the last two choices before I clicked on D. None of the options really fit me, but D was the closest to what I would have done. Traitors were traitors. If Luke or Clare did that to me, I wouldn't laugh, in fact I probably do what option C did, except I'd forgive them only after they proved to me how much they've changed.
I waited patiently as the laptop began to load. When the results popped up, I instantly frowned. The hunters beside me noticed the change in my expression, and took a look.

"Slytherin," Thalia read. "Welcome to the House of Snakes, where ambition, cunning, and determination will get you far." She gave me a grin. "So we're like natural enemies. Is there something you're not telling me, Seth?"

"I have nothing to tell you." I said briskly. "Besides, this quiz is just for fun. It's not a real indicator of who I'm like."

Slytherin, the House of Bigots and Death Eaters. What a joke. I quickly scrolled down to see my percentages. I was dismayed to see that I had a 55% affinity for Slytherin, a 25% for Ravenclaw, and a 10% for Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. Again, I reminded myself that this quiz was nothing more but a quiz.

"Such a high percentage for Slytherin House," Elena said when she saw the screen. "How not surprising."

"Oh yeah," I said, sarcastic. "Because all guys are like those arrogant bigots, all planning to be death eaters in training. Nope, not surprising at all."

Thalia smirked. "No need to sound so jealous. It's hardly your fault that Eliza and I got into the best house-!"

"Yeah right," Aria cut in. "Gryffindor is a house of stubborn, brave fools. It's Ravenclaw that is the best."

"No, it's Hufflepuff!" Charlotte argued. "At least we're not arrogant like you Ravenclaws! They are all about fairness and loyalty."

"Mostly because they lack everything else," Elena muttered. Charlotte shot her brunette friend a mock glare.

If I wasn't so sour about my own result, I would have found the scene very funny. Who knew the Hunters of Artemis were such avid Harry Potter fans? One of them was even declared a Hufflepuff, a house known for modesty and fair-mindedness. Ironic.

"It's kind of surprising how you girls like Harry Potter this much," I commented. "Don't you all have a thing against guys and romance?"

"That's only in the real world." Aria replied. "Fictional works are fair game, though we aren't allowed to have these 'character crushes' obviously."

"JK Rowling is also one of the most famous female authors," Elena mentioned. "Of course we would respect her work."

Okay, never mind about the non-biasness.

"You know, you aren't too bad of a male." Elena admitted. "You're decent enough." Aria nodded at her words.

"Yeah, most guys are too annoying and big-headed." she said. "But I suppose you are alright."

"Um, thanks?" I said.
"Just take the compliments in stride, Seth," Thalia urged. "It took me days to get them to open up to you more." She turned to them, grinning. "See? I told you he's okay to be around."

Charlotte stared at her. "Your opinion doesn't count. He was already your friend before you joined us."

"It does count!"

"I think you're okay too." Eliza said to me. "Maybe if you spend some time talking with the other hunters like you just did with us. I'm sure they'll warm up to you eventually."

"Really?" I said. She nodded. "Okay Eliza, I'll take your advice. Seriously, if I happen to go missing one day, you'll know who to ask for answers." She rolled her eyes.

"It's getting late," Thalia began, looking up at the darkened sky. "I'm going to head to my tent. Hopefully Lycaon will show his ugly face by then."

I nodded, suddenly realizing how tired out I was. Lycaon better show up soon. It's getting boring just scavenging for tracks. I didn't know if I could deal with this same routine for a fourth day in a row.

-o-

By tomorrow night, Thalia's wish came true.

Eliza and I were in the middle of looking through another part of the forest when we heard the sound of gunfire. My sharp eyesight immediately picked up the vibrant red smoke in the sky. Lycaon and his pack was less than a mile away from us.

"Let's go!" I called. Eliza nodded before taking off after me.

I raced across the forest terrain with ease: leaping off branches and walking nimbly across them. I nearly fell before I summoned one of my knives, quickly pinning it onto tree trunk, and used it to swing myself back up, enjoying the rush of wind before landing onto another sturdy branch. I quickly willed the silver knife to vanish and reappear in my hand. Eliza was running just below me, easily matching my pace.

I heard the sound of teeth gnashing and bows being strung as Eliza and I finally reached the rest of the Hunters, and dang those wolves are huge! Each of them was around Lappy's size: around 10 feet long and had eyes as red as blood. I saw Phoebe taking one on while Thalia assisted Charlotte in taking down another. Artemis had her hands full: taking on at least five of those big beasts with only her knives. Unfortunately, she couldn't transform into her real form, or else the rest of us (excluding me) would be taken out.

"Destroy those blasted hunters!" Lycaon called out, his voice shrill. "Feast upon them all!"

So this was Lycaon, the first werewolf. He was the only one of his pack that had a humanoid form. He had a muscular and hairy frame, and stood at least 7 feet tall and his yellow eyes glowed eerily in the night.

One of the wolves lunged towards me, and I quickly notched up my silver bow and shot it headfirst. Eliza stood beside me as she took out another wolf. Three wolves approached us as Eliza and I stood back to back. I still had my bow notched as I fired wave after wave of arrows. I managed to kill one off while another dodged the fatal blow and lunged its teeth at my face.

Eliza noticed the attack a second sooner and killed the wolf with an arrow through its mouth. I
mouthed a word of thanks before we took on the last wolf. While Eliza distracted the beast with her arrows, I ran towards the wolf at full speed, summoning my pair of knives and leaping upward and bringing down my knives straight into its neck. The wolf howled in pain as I more or less beheaded the overgrown monster.

Artemis had recovered from the earlier onslaught, and she quickly met Lycaon in battle. With her petite figure, Artemis dodged the werewolf's swipes easily while cutting him. However, even from this distance, I saw his cuts disappearing and healing in seconds.

Apparently, Lycaon realized that his pack was overpowered, and quickly howled for them to retreat. During that time, Artemis was forced to avoid being stampeded by wolves as Lycaon slyly retreated from his battle with the goddess, while ordering some of his pack to detain Artemis and the hunters' chase.

"Come on, Eliza!" I yelled. "We can't let Lycaon get away!"

She protested, "what about Lady Artemis?!"

"As long as there are at least two of us it will be fine!" I assured her. "I'll watch your back!"

She nodded hesitantly. We quickly moved across the clearing, dodging some of the wolves and arrows being shot, and swiftly killing off any wolves that blocked our path. Once the coast was clear, we ran across the undergrowth and my eyes caught sight of his pack just 30 feet ahead of us. I also heard scuffling from behind; the hunters were now in pursuit.

I shot forth another wave of arrows, killing off many wolves in the process. The other wolves snarled and moved to attack. Eliza and I once again took them all on, but the hunters behind us also helped by shooting the arrows into the closest beasts. During the midst of the fighting, I saw Lycaon sneaked away from his pack and into the darkness of the forest.

I looked around for a moment and signaled Eliza, who joined me in hunting down Lycaon.

Artemis apparently noticed this, and yelled, "Seth! Do not pursue him!"

I paid her words no heed as I took after Eliza into the darkness. Lycaon was just this close- this close from getting his dog-head a one-way ticket to Tartarus. My stubbornness would not let me give this hunt up, not with my target this close!

Eliza gave a scream when she suddenly got attacked from above. Lycaon had her pinned down as she almost helplessly tried to get free from his choking hold.

"Let her go!" I yelled, as I shot my arrows straight at him. He dropped Eliza, and with a snarl, grabbed one of my soaring arrows by the teeth and snapped it in half. Before I knew it, he got close and landed a punch to my abdomen, causing me to fly back ten feet. I felt my back slam into an oak, nearly crushing my spine.

"Foolish hunters!" Lycaon growled. "Do you think you can take on the mighty Wolf King and live?" He yanked Eliza by her hair and tossed her in my direction, her whole body slamming into me. I gasped out in pain. Eliza appeared dazed, her head was bleeding.

I moved Eliza off me carefully before I charged Lycaon head on with my knives. He swapped away my attack briskly before aiming a kick at my side. I lowered myself involuntarily before Lycaon grabbed me by the neck with one arm, choking me.

"You are a fool, Seth Hunter!" Lycaon said; his teeth suddenly clear with saliva. "Taking me on
your own? Or is it because you have your mommy close by?" He tightened his hold on me, causing me to rasp for air. "I shall have your head on a stick!"

He aimed to bite me before he buckled- Eliza had slyly crept up to us and stabbed him in the leg, causing Lycaon to roar in anguish, and therefore releasing me. I fell to the ground, choking. I saw Lycaon yank out the knife roughly, screaming while doing so, and I watched with horror how the wound quickly sealed itself.

"Oh gods…" Eliza whimpered, watching Lycaon approached her with fear. In a flash, Lycaon closed the gap and stomped on Eliza harshly, causing her to cry out.

"Eliza!" I yelled as I tried to get up, my bruised joints screaming in pain while doing so.

"Pathetic little girl!" Lycaon rasped. "I should kill you first!"

Before he can strike her another blow, I had quickly got up and latched myself onto his back, locking him in a choke-hold. Lycaon thrashed about, trying to get me off, but I continued to choke him with all my might. Eliza slowly but surely moved away from the danger zone. I heard the hunters approaching quickly.

That was when Lycaon bit down on my arm.

There was screaming, but surprisingly…the screams weren't just coming from me. I had dropped to the ground, pressing a hand at my bleeding arm as Lycaon suddenly roared in pain.

"You!" Lycaon screeched; his yellow eyes furious. "What have you done to me?!!" His mouth was foaming, almost as if it was steaming hot. "What in Kronos' name are you?!"

"I didn't do anything!" I hissed. "You were the one who bit me!"

Lycaon didn't reply, his whole body twisted in anguish, and his hands were still clawing at his steaming mouth. I could only stare in shock at the horrific display. Soon, Lycaon's body was beginning to dissolve into mist. Artemis chose that moment to show up with the rest of the hunters, her expression taken aback when she saw the werewolf.

"Curse you Artemis!" Lycaon roared at the goddess. "How dare you fasten such a weapon against me! How dare you...!" The rest of his sentence remained unheard as he dissolved away completely.

What in Hades just happened?

"Seth Hunter," Artemis called; her voice so cold it sent chills down my spine. "Do you care to explain what happened here? In fact, can you also explain why you disobeyed my orders and landed not only yourself, but also one of my hunters in such peril?"

I swallowed heavily.

Oh crap.

-o-
Black and White

Oh crap.

After Artemis ordered her hunters to clear the mess Eliza and I made, I was ordered to see her immediately afterwards in her tent, which meant Artemis was extremely pissed off. Eliza was being taken care of by the other hunters, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt seeing her so badly injured. If only I had followed orders, Eliza wouldn't have ended up like this. Or maybe if I had done things differently, could I have prevented Eliza from getting hurt? When I finally reached her to apologize, she only shook her head and told me not to worry.

"It's not your fault, okay? I'll be fine, Seth." she insisted. "Nothing a little ambrosia won't fix."

I only nodded glumly before she was taken out of my sight. Now, I had an angry goddess waiting to chew me out.

I entered her tent cautiously, almost timidly. I didn't know what Artemis was going to do- what if she got so fed up with me that she decided to turn me into a jackalope? I wouldn't put it past her.

I heard her before I saw her. "What were you thinking when you decided to disobey me?"

I didn't say anything. At this point, it was best to just keep silent until the storm blew over.

"I had warned you many times…" You only warned me once. "…never to take on Lycaon alone, and what do you do? You do exactly that." She told me, giving a very narrow, stern face as she stared at me from across the space.

"I didn't take him on alone," I said, finally finding my voice. "I had Eliza with me, she-!"

"…is now badly injured and incapable of action for at least two days." She finished. I flinched. It was that bad? "While that may have been true, you should have alerted us to your location once you realized Eliza was unable to assist you. We would have reached you earlier then. Now what do you have to say for yourself?"

I swallowed, "I-I'll take full responsibility for this. I'll even look after Eliza if you want. B-but at least we got Lycaon! I helped you completed the mission-!"

"At too great a cost," Artemis interrupted, walking towards me until we were face to face. "I told you before that I didn't want to suffer unnecessary losses. Now, I have one of my hunters immobile. If you had listened to me, none of this-!"

"I know!" I said steadily. "You think I don't know that? I've regretted my actions, Artemis! Isn't that the point you are trying to get across? Besides, it's not like any of us died. You even said Eliza would be fine after two days. Lycaon is now in Tartarus! Shouldn't you at least be glad about that?"

"That is beside the point!" she told me. "The matter we are discussing is your act of disobedience- not about Lycaon. But if we must go down this direction- yes, I am glad that filth is now where he belongs. However, you don't seem to understand how incredibly lucky you are to escape with your life!"

"But I did!" I shot back, slowly growing more irritated. "Okay? I am still standing here…alive and alright. The mission is completed! Eliza will be fine in a few days! Nobody else was hurt. It's a win-win situation! I don't get why you are still so angry-!"
"You blindly rushed into danger even when you were warned! Of course, I am angry." Artemis replied hotly. "Are you trying to get yourself killed, Seth?"

"What?!" I nearly yelled. I felt my body tremble. "No! I'm not suicidal!"

"Then you better start acting like you aren't!" Artemis retorted. "How am I supposed to rely on you when you can't even obey a simple order? There are a lot more monsters out there far stronger than Lycaon!"

"I know that!" I repeated.

"Do you?" Artemis questioned, her eyes narrowed to a point that I can literally see flashes of silver run through them. "Your…triump (if you can even call it that) over Lycaon was a matter of pure luck. If he hadn't done what he did, you and Eliza would most definitely have died before I could reach you both. Are you listening to what I am saying, Seth?"

I nodded glumly, my face not reaching her eyes. Oh gods, I just to want to leave and forget this ever happened! But I could not: With Artemis berating me in her 12 year old form (I think she's doing that on purpose), Eliza in intense care, and mental images of Lycaon choking me to death…I couldn't think of anything else but that.

Artemis had been saying other things about me while I was immersed with my thoughts, but one sentence caught me off-guard:

"…Your condition won't always be there to save you," Artemis was saying. My eye twitched at her tone and description, but she kept going, unaware of what she just invoked in me. "You may not trust me Seth, but I truly want to be able to trust you, and that is saying a lot on my part. But if you keep up with those reckless actions, even your condition's advantages-!"

"What condition?!" I finally exclaimed, insulted. "Do you mean my celestial silver body, the one you made? Yeah, I already deduced what happened. I figured it's because my abnormal blood entered Lycaon's system and ended up burning him inside out!"

"Then you must understand...!"

"No, I don't!" I interrupted rudely. "I don't understand why you of all people are saying 'my condition' like I have some incurable disease! I don't need reminders of how much of a freak I am! Especially when it is you who made me like this!"

First, there was Lynetta and Walt talking about 'my condition' like I had come out of a test tube. It didn't bother me that much when they said it, since it was genuinely out of curiosity, and they haven't repeated that word since, but the way Artemis kept saying that word…it sounded so condescending that I instantly hated it!

For a moment, Artemis was wordless. She swallowed visibly, thinking. We stared at each other blankly before I lifted my gaze away from her, too offended to say anything. I had my arms crossed.

"I…I didn't realize," she said quietly. I raised an eyebrow, surprised she would admit any wrong. Artemis was a prideful goddess after all. For a second, I thought about giving a retort, or some sarcastic comment meant to rub her the wrong way, but I had to remember who I was talking to. Yet another disadvantage to add to my list. My body was starting to tremble visibly.

I lowered my eyelids, and rubbed my forehead absentmindedly, giving a sigh.

"Artemis, I know you are just trying to look out for me," I began slowly. These words were starting
to sound familiar, but I might as well get the deed over with. "I know I'm not exactly the ideal child you always wanted, but... I'll admit that I am trying okay? I promise you that this... foolishness of mine won't be repeated."

"Seth..." Artemis started. I shook my head.

"If you will allow it, I'll look after Eliza," I said. Since Artemis didn't reply, I took that as a yes. "I'll stay with you and the Hunters until she recovers completely. I at least owe her that much. Then, I'll be out of your hair by next morning. I'm sure Walt and Lynetta will provide my transportation, so there's no need for you to do anything else." I said, backing away from her.

Artemis just stared at me; her face conflicted before she grew alarmed. "Wait, Seth, your arm—it was bitten..."

"It's already healed," I replied briskly. "Don't worry about me." Then I muttered an "I'm sorry" just quick enough for Artemis to hear before I exited out of her tent. She didn't call or come out to stop me thank goodness.

I walked away from her tent quickly and entered my own, drawing down the covers as I did so. I went to my desk and pulled out a piece of ambrosia cake, munching on it quietly while I wrapped bandages around my injured arm, tugging it tight with my teeth. Once I've done that, I lifted my shirt up and applied some nectar ointment to the faded purple and black bruises on my chest, torso, and back. By the time I was done, my body was feeling a lot better than it was moments ago. Lycaon wasn't the only one with quick healing abilities.

It was a good thing that there weren't any visible injuries Artemis noticed or knew about besides my arm. Those were the first to disappear thankfully. I wouldn't hear the end of it with her fussing over me. I already felt guilty enough with Eliza, and I didn't want Artemis to see me as weak. She already thought of me as a foolish kid, and she was right unfortunately. It was a good thing I left her presence quickly before she noticed my wobbling.

I walked up to a tall mirror to make sure I was presentable, in a healthy condition. I had changed out of my torn black shirt and tossed on one of the white collared shirts and a navy blue jacket Lynetta had bought me, my bandaged arm safely hidden under my sleeves. It would probably heal after an hour or so. Somehow werewolf bites healed a lot slower than my usual cuts. Thanks to my 'Apollo Mind' I knew that it was because werewolf bites were infectious, but luckily for me, my healing abilities took care of that, so I wouldn't have any feverish side effects.

After another bite of ambrosia cake, I exited my tent and went to visit Eliza.

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"How are you doing Eliza?" I said softly beside her. She was lying still on her bed. There were two hunters beside the entrance behind me, scrutinizing my every move. They obviously didn't trust me enough to leave me alone with her.

She blinked her hazel colored eyes before she replied, "I'm much better. Thank you for looking after me for so long, but I think I can handle it from here."

"It's only been two days," I said. "It's the least I could do. But if you insist...?"

She nodded. "I told you already that I didn't blame you for what happened. You need to stop feeling the unnecessary guilt. It just makes you even more depressing."

"I suppose," I muttered. "I can't help it though. It's just in my nature."
"Yeah…but really, Seth," she said, "You're going to make Lady Artemis worry about you in this state. Try to lighten up a little. You're always frowning too. A smile every once in a while won't hurt."

"That doesn't sound like what a huntress would say to a guy," I muttered. Eliza narrowed her eyes at my comment.

"Not all of us joined the hunters because we shun guys," Eliza said intently. I was startled by her defensive tone. "I've been with the hunters for over a decade now, but I've never lost sight of my purpose for joining. Although it is our doctrine to favor girls, I joined because I saw the Hunters as the better option. I'm the child of a minor goddess, Seth, and if you noticed how those poor children are experiencing at the camp, then I'm sure you understand why the Hunters appealed to me."

"I apologize," I said sheepishly. "I just blurted it out without thinking. Heck, even your lieutenant had other reasons for joining. I'm really sorry."

Eliza huffed. "Apology accepted. Just try to be more open-minded. I have to work on that too. The world isn't painted in black and white."

"I'll try." I gave her a quick smile to prove her other point. She only rolled her eyes at my attempt, amused.

"Is there anything you need?" I asked. "Water, food, or what?"

"What I need is sleep," she said, "and I can't do that while you are here."

I lifted my hands up, shrugging. "Alright, I'll leave! You win."

Eliza gave a small smile before she turned to her other side and closed her eyes. I quietly got up and took my leave.

-o-

"I heard you were leaving tomorrow?" Thalia had asked. It was already night, and the hunters and I were sitting around the campfire, eating our catch.

I nodded, and said, "yeah."

"So did you mention it to her?"

I raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

"You know, about that demigod scent training…" Thalia said slowly. "Did you mention me to Artemis?"

Oh snap, I had completely forgotten. I even told Thalia I would mention it first thing.

"Oh my gods…it slipped my mind completely," I voiced my thoughts. "I-I'll do that right now-

"No, you don't have to," she said. "I already asked her, and she's willing to give me some training, just to see how it goes. I just wanted to know if you gave an earlier recommendation. Besides, I heard that you and Lady Artemis aren't exactly…you know."

"Where did you hear that from?" I mumbled. Did the hunters spread rumors and gossip too?

"Your mother," she said, surprising me. I immediately felt ashamed for thinking that earlier thought. I
really was too condemnatory. "She confided in me about it when I asked what was wrong with her."

"Is something wrong with her?"

"She didn't give me any specifics, but I can guess." she said. "I know that it isn't any of my business, but are you sure you want to leave Artemis on such a negative note?"

"It's not my fault," I said stubbornly. "It's up to her if she wants us to leave on a negative note, not me."

"Well, she can't exactly do that if you don't give her the chance." Thalia pointed out. "You've been avoiding her like she's your enemy…everyone's noticed."

At that, I took a look around, and noticed the quick glances here and there by wandering Hunters, each of their faces turning quickly away when they realized I was watching them. One of them even narrowed her eyes at me and scoffed indignantly at my face.

It was obvious whose fault they thought it was.

"Dang it," I muttered. "Was it really that obvious?" Thalia threw me a look.

"No duh," Thalia replied, "That's why I came to tell you, it's gotten to the point that I couldn't resist."

"Alright I get it! No need to rub it in." I said, "but I don't want to go crawling back to her and apologize for something I believe isn't my fault."

"I'm not saying it's your fault," Thalia reiterated. "I'm asking you to let Artemis approach you. It's not that hard, Seth."

I thought about that for a moment.

"I'm approachable," I insisted. Thalia snorted.

"Yeah, and I'm a Seaweed Brain," Thalia deadpanned. "You've locked yourself away in your tent for hours doing who knows what, and when you do come out, it has something to do with Eliza or food. Definitely approachable."

I groaned, "How do I deal with you, Thalia? Seriously?"

She gave me a grin and pat on the shoulder. "It's because I'm awesome."

"Have you been talking to Apollo?" I asked. She blushed. "Oh…you have been talking to Apollo!"

"No I have not!" she said, "I have not and will never talk to him on my own." I suddenly laughed at her expression. "Don't laugh at me! What did I do that is so funny?"

"You've got the hots for Apollo!" I exclaimed, laughing. Thalia's face turned embarrassingly red. "Not so innocent of a hunter are you?"

"Don't be stupid, Seth." Thalia snapped; her eyes darted back and forth to check if anyone heard. "I'm a hunter, although… I do admit that Apollo is pretty hot… b-but that's what every girl thinks!"

"I'll make sure to tell him that next time I see him." I smirked.

"You wouldn't dare-!"
"Hey, I get it okay?" I said, snickering. "I mean, I'm a dude and even I think Apollo is good looking. Why do you think he has so many kids? It's okay to have a little crush."

"Oh yeah?" Thalia said. "How about you Seth? You find any girls good looking enough for you?" I only smirked at her attempt. She was trying to turn my game against me.

"I don't judge a girl by her appearance," I told her snidely. "It's the inside that counts. Cliché answer I know, but it's true. A girl could be really beautiful, but if her personality sucks…then so long to that."

"So you would be fine with a nice, female monster?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean: A human-looking girl who wouldn't chew my head off would be nice."

"Come on, Seth." Thalia said impatiently. "You got to have a type."

"I don't actually."

"No way, every guy's got to have a type. Do you prefer blondes or brunettes?"

"Thalia I'm not like every other guy. I'm not going to answer that-

"Just pick one or the other!"

"Are you sure you want to discuss this?" I said. "Imagine if Artemis heard you…"

"Then just answer the question and it won't come to that." she shot back. "You keep on delaying…now you are making me really curious. Just tell me the truth, Seth. It's easier for you that way."

"You want the truth?"


I looked at her straight in the eye. "I don't date."

Thalia's face drew a blank. "Wait…what?"

"I don't date," I told her, and then I smirked, "you should have thought of that option considering my heritage. But that's the truth, Thalia. So there you have it. That's why I don't care what a girl looks like. There's no need for me to care. Since I plan on being single, or as Apollo would say, forever a bachelor."

"Wait a minute, back up," Thalia said; her face filled with confusion. "Since when did you decide this?"

"I think it was a few months ago."

"Just a few months ago? What changed your mind about dating? You aren't incapable of love are you? And you don't seem to…dislike girls like the hunters do with guys."

"Love is a possibility for me, I just chose not to pursue it, and yeah, you're right. I don't share Artemis' views in that area. As for my real reasons, I would like to keep that to myself." I said carefully.

I waited for Thalia to let the information sink in.
"Did you tell anyone else?" she asked.

"Besides you, Apollo knows, and I think Artemis suspects. Other than them, I haven't had the chance to mention it to anyone else."

"Okay, wow. This is still a surprise to me." Thalia muttered. "I mean, a child of Artemis and I didn't even...huh."

"Calm down, Thalia," I advised. "Sorry for surprising you like that, but you kind of forced it out."

"It's just...what a waste you know?" she said. I was confused.

"What's wasted?"

"I may be a hunter, but I was just a regular female demigod a few months ago. So I can say for certain that you are the kind of guy most girls our age would like."

I snorted. "Yeah right. What's to like about me?"

"Well, girls like a guy who respects them, someone who can take care of them and be there for them, yet gives them enough personal space. You kind of fit that description. You're very respectful, quite protective based on what happened with Eliza, and you cherish what you have since you've experienced loss. Since you like your personal space, I think it's likely that you would do the same for the one you like. Not many guys fit that kind of bill you know."

I stared at her in disbelief before I scoffed. "What the heck, Thalia? That sounds so artificial."

"Maybe, but it's true though when you think about it. I mean, I know you have flaws, but everyone has them." she pointed out, and she added, "your interests also make you appealing. You're athletic, intelligent, and friendly when you chose to be. Your looks aren't bad either."

I frowned. "That's because I have Artemis' face. My talents, looks, and interests --almost all of it--come from her. If not her, then there's Apollo's portion. Take those away, and what am I left with huh?"

Nothing, I thought sullenly. *I'm left with nothing worth mentioning.*

Thalia gave a small grin. "Seth Hunter."

I blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Seth Hunter." she repeated. "That's the answer. You are left with what defines only you, and personally, as one of your best friends, I think that's the best part."

I felt my face deaden, my breathing uneven from the shear unexpectedness of her answer. I had asked a rhetorical question, I didn't expect her to answer me so quickly...and with a response like that? How was I supposed to react? No one's said such a thing to me before...

"Thank you," I said quietly, not looking at her. Thalia only smiled.

"See? My point exactly. You are quite a respectful guy." she said. "Now do you need help packing up? You are leaving tomorrow morning right? I think...it would be a good idea if you let Artemis handle your transportation. What do you think?"

I nodded, smiling. "That's sounds like a good idea, and I would appreciate your help greatly."
With Thalia's help, I was able to pack up swiftly before meeting Artemis at the arranged time. Artemis was already waiting for me when I finally got out and had my tent and items stuffed in my bags. The hunters were carrying on with whatever they were tasked with, but Aria and Charlotte gave me a quick 'good morning' when they saw me. I gave them the same courtesy.

Eliza was also out and about. She was helping Phoebe with something before she called out, "see you soon, Seth!" Phoebe turned, and noticing me, also gave a silent acknowledgment. I gave her a nod.

Smiling, I replied, "take care, Eliza." I've come to see Eliza as a little sister of sorts, the feeling felt almost…natural.

Thalia was beside Artemis as I came up to them. She gave me a jab in the arm, her eyes looking intently at me before directing them at Artemis, who looked a bit uncomfortable. Thalia was mentally saying 'Go on!'

I gave her a scowl before saying, "g-good morning, Lady Artemis."

"Good morning, Seth." she replied back with a light smile. "Shall we go?"

I nodded. Thalia gave me a quick hug before giving me and Artemis a friendly wave. I took Artemis' outstretched hand, and she teleported the two of us away. In a brief moment, when the two of us materialized, I noticed the familiar Tudor house just meters away.

"I have already informed your caretakers of our arrival," she told me, letting go of my hand. "They will be expecting your report."

I nodded briefly, suddenly filled with dread. Walt had told me specifically to follow Artemis' orders, and if Artemis had already informed him…would this mission be a failure in his eyes?

"Are you alright?" she asked me softly. I hesitated before answering.

"I'm fine…are you okay?" She looked at me questionably. I rephrased my question quickly. "Of course you are fine physically- you're a goddess after all. It's just… I've been told that my…biasness can be very hurtful."

"Are you trying to apologize to me, Seth Hunter?" Artemis said coyly. My face reddened with embarrassment. She saw right through me. Dang…I was too obvious.

"Maybe," I muttered.

She smiled, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Then I'll be glad to accept your apology." I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Continue to practice masking your demigod scent, preferably in noisy areas this time. Take care of yourself, Seth. There's no need to worry: I told Walt only what he needs to know."

I stared at her blankly. That didn't sound reassuring.

With that said, Artemis let go of my shoulder, and her whole figure shimmered away in silver light, causing me to lift an arm to shield me from the overwhelming feelings that was certain to come forth after seeing a true form. When the light finally died down, Artemis was nowhere in sight. I walked up the porch and rang the doorbell. Lynetta greeted me at the door.
"Right on time," she commented dryly. I raised an eyebrow. "Mr. Forger has requested your presence in his studio."

I sighed as I entered through the mahogany door. "Is it about my report?" Lynetta nodded. "Right… so he wants to see me right now?" I asked, gesturing my bags still in my hands.

"Just dropped them off at the door for now," Lynetta advised. "It's best to get it over with."

I swallowed at the sound of her words, before I headed down the hallway alone. I paused for a moment before I knocked on the desired door.

"Come on in, Hunter." Walt said gruffly.

I did so, and my eyes had to adjust to the new change. This was the first time I've seen this room without the vibrant smoke. I took in the antique shelves and tables. The worktable cleared out with no signs of powder or scraps. The ceiling was even programmed to match the sky, in order to give Walt a sense of time. As for Walt, he was leaning against an empty wall with his arms crossed. He regarded me casually, his dark hair ruffled at the edges.

"You wanted to hear my report…sir?" I added quickly. He nodded. With that, I gave a quick summary of my time with the hunters, my encounter with Lycaon and his wolves, and…my lack of obedience. There's no point in hiding that, not with Artemis giving him an earlier assessment. He probably already knew about it.

I couldn't diagnose his expression when I was done. Walt's face had remained frustratingly blank. I couldn't tell if he was disappointed or what, and that unknown factor was putting me on edge. Did I fail the mission?

"Job well done, Hunter," he finally uttered.

Wait…what?

"B-but sir, I disobeyed orders. I thought you would have been angry."

"You have a dead werewolf to thank for that," he answered. "Don't misunderstand me, Hunter. I don't support civil misconduct. But you got the mission completed, satisfying my requirements. Since Lady Artemis also did not voice any concerns, your mission is considered a success."

"She didn't?" I said. He shook his head. "B-but she had told me my success was a fluke…a stroke of good luck…"

"That's her opinion," Walt told me narrowly. "The end justifies the means. I don't care what tactics you use or how incredible your luck is. As long as the mission is completed, things don't get worse, and you still have your life intact: you get a thumbs-up from me. If you aren't satisfied with how things turned out, then improve so it won't happen again. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," I said, still slightly disturbed by his ideology, but it made sense…in a way. I could live with that.

"Good, I'm done with you, Hunter," Walt said, straightening himself up. "Lynetta will be expecting you in the Training Room in two hours. So make sure you eat and unpack before then."

"Yes sir," I said. I exited out of Walt's studio, grabbed the bags I left and headed towards my room. My sense of functioning in this house quickly restored.
Lynetta watched silently as Seth Hunter trained furiously. He aimed a loud, resounded high kick, and the wooden pole splintered almost instantly before he quickly aimed another blow with his bandaged fists.

When he had first arrived, Seth couldn't even scrap the wooden poles, much less break them. He was improving at a fast rate, Lynetta noted. She had finished her training one week short of a year, setting a record. At this rate, if Seth still continued to improve…he may end up finishing the training quicker than she did. He had already mastered archery, knives, and combat. His level of strength has improved, as demonstrated earlier. His endurance still continued to surprise her, and he's gotten faster. Lynetta had to keep her eyes trained on him at all times during their matches.

Besides those logistics, Seth now grasped at least a basic understanding of swordsmanship. He was still nowhere close to being a master swordsman, but he can at least hold his own in a sword fight. However, his skill with a spear and javelin has now advanced to the next level, and he threw boomerangs and axes efficiently with high accuracy.

*Maybe after the fourth test, Lynetta thought, I'll start teaching him how to handle fire arms.*

She wrote it down on her clipboard. Just as a reminder. Then, Lynetta looked at the progress report in its entirety:

**Student: Seth Hunter**  
*Age: 15*  
*Height: 5' 8*  
*Weight: 154 pounds*

**Statistics**

- **Strength:** 8/10
- **Speed:** 9/10
- **Endurance:** 11/10
- **Intuition:** 9/10
- **Motivation:** 10/10
- **Teamwork:** 6/10
- **Stealth:** 9/10
- **Self-Esteem:** 3/10

Lynetta had added in that last statistic just recently. If it weren't for the fact that Seth had expressed his strong interest to live, she may have mistaken him as suicidal due to his incredibly low self-esteem. It was to be expected, knowing how he came to being, but this…flaw, was now a deterrent on his confidence, and without confidence, Seth will always go into battle second-guessing his actions. She'll leave this aspect for Walt to fix.

Overall, it was a very good progress report, though the teamwork can be better. Based on Lady Artemis’ comments, and what Walt had gathered from Chiron by Hermes, Seth was very independent and he only worked well with people he was familiar with. If his partner was one of his close friends, Seth would do fine, but he still displayed small reliance on them. If he ended up being
paired with a stranger, he would demonstrate little cooperation, and end up doing things himself. This again, could be critical. His friends wouldn't always be there, and while independence was noteworthy, it could also be seen as a weakness when facing stronger opponents.

Of course, this progress report wasn't an accurate portrayal of Seth's abilities since it didn't factor in special circumstances. Lynetta liked keeping things in order and putting them into a format that she easily understood, and this happened to be one of them.

"Lynetta, what do you want me to do now?" Seth had asked. All of the wooden poles were now splintered. The broken pieces scattered all over the place, making a mess. Mr. Forger definitely wouldn't like that.

"Clean up the mess you made," she said. "Then we will head for the boxing arena." Seth instantly groaned before he complied, leaning down to pick up the pieces.

She smiled to herself. Seth was definitely turning out to be interesting. She's almost certain that Seth will beat her record, despite Walt insisting that it was still 'too early'.

No, she definitely made the right bet. She wasn't a daughter of Athena for nothing. Walt Forger would be saying good-bye to 50 drachmas by the time that happened.

-o-
"'Enjoy the fresh air!' he said. 'You'll love this one!' he said." I hissed while shoving my way past frantic civilians. I could hear the sound of a monster's roar as I hijacked a bicycle and quickly rode down the street.

I took the item I just found in my hand and shoved it into my backpack, and mentally scratched the item off my list. Then, I tried to recall the items that I'd yet to gather. After grabbing the Panasonic disk, I only had one item left to collect before I could get outside of Boston, where Lynetta would be waiting for me at the allotted time.

This was my 'third' exam, fourth if you included my mission with Artemis three weeks ago. I should have been on my guard when Walt announced that I was going to have a Boston field trip.

Now, I was riding on a hijacked bicycle, completely weaponless, and with a backpack of useless junk. Oh, and did I mention the pack of monsters that were lusting after my blood? As if that wasn't enough, I apparently alerted the mortal police of my recent robbery. Those piercing sirens were just music to my ears.

Let's back up a bit.

9 hours earlier...

Before Walt gave me the big news, I happened to be in the music room, playing Chopin's Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 9 No. 2. I felt my body sway as I closed my eyes and simply absorbed the melody. The softness and vivacity of the piece kept my mind alert and at ease all at once. It was a very...unique feeling. It took me the last three weeks to master this one. So far, I've already played Fur Elise, Greensleeves, Kiss the Rain, some Schumann pieces, and Beethoven's 9th symphony. After another Chopin piece, I learned that I would be playing Clair de Lune by Debussy next.

After having to redo Fur Elise, I went onto practicing it again for another week. However, despite what Walt and Lynetta had told me, I still couldn't find what I was doing wrong. I knew that I got the notes correctly, but I couldn't seem to grasp that 'emotion' and energy concept. Lynetta decided to help me out by showing me a YouTube clip.

In case you didn't know already, Walt's place was hardwired with all kinds of weird stuff. Come on, he had a stadium-sized basement for crying out loud! Lynetta also mentioned how they even had a Misty Cloak, which was this Mist covering device that shrouded the Tudor house in almost complete concealment. I said 'almost' because it didn't work at a close range. Lynetta got the honor of shooting some reptilian monster in the face. I had the honor of cleaning up its splattered guts left on the porch. Seriously, why can't monsters just dissolve away completely? Anyway, the Misty Cloak also gave us free WiFi, so surfing the web was no danger here either.

So I was watching this YouTube clip intently, trying to figure out what made this professional pianist's playing superior to mine. I didn't catch it the first time since I was distracted by the pianist's gestures, so Lynetta played it a second time. This time, I focused on the music itself.

It was...entrancing. It was the same song, but I couldn't say that I had that quality in my playing. How was I ever going to match that?
"Have you ever wondered why Beethoven created this piece?" Lynetta asked me. I shook my head. "*Fur Elise* is meant for his only known love, Therese. Knowing this, how do you think Beethoven would have played for his most important person? Think about it."

I did. If Beethoven was playing this piece to his love, then he would have played it with *passion*. Except how could I mimic that? I didn't have a crush like Beethoven did, nor would I ever want one. Thankfully, a person could become just as important in other ways. So the next time I sat in that piano bench, I tried imagining Ms. Lewinsky and the kids on the other side of the room, just waiting to hear me play.

Of course, it didn't turn out perfectly the first time. I screwed up on the notes since my mind was too distracted. It also didn't happen on the second try, or the third. At that moment, I imagined that the kids would most likely be making fun of me at this point, while Ms. Lewinsky would just give me that warm, motherly smile and tell me to try my best.

When I finally did achieve it, I haven't even realized that I had done it. I just kept playing, repeating page after page of lyrics. I didn't notice anything that stood out differently. It was only until I finished that I heard clapping. Walt was by the doorway, along with Lynetta, who stood behind him, with a small smile for once.

"Bravo, Hunter." Walt had told me that day. "Now *that*, is what I call music."

Since then, I eventually got the hang of this music stuff. My success with Greensleeves came soon after, followed by other songs. Though, I still couldn't put to words what it was that I did right. Whatever it was, I was starting to enjoy piano a lot more, and that was a step in the right direction.

"Hunter!" Walt suddenly exclaimed, slamming open the door. I flinched in surprise, abruptly putting a halt to Chopin. "I'd thought up the *best* exam for you!"

"Huh?"

"Come on, get up Hunter." Walt said. "What's with that sheepish look? You should be excited!"

"I am?" I said warily. I've never seen Walt this enthusiastic about an exam, or anything. This could only mean something really good or something just downright awful.

He gave a grin. "You will be having a taste of Boston!"

I blinked twice. "*Boston*?"

"Lynetta tells me that you want to get outside a bit more," Walt told me. "The house could be a little stifling I'll admit, so why not have some fresh air? So, I decided that this exam will be taking place outside in a nice attractive city. You should be thanking me."

"Thank you, sir." I said briefly. It's true that I've wanted to go out more. I never thought Walt would take it into consideration.

"The next exam can be a short break for you, Hunter," Walt replied. "All you need to do is get these items from a list I made. You won't be bringing any weapons. Once you see the item from the list, just take it and put them into your bag."

"Isn't that considered stealing?" I said skeptically.

"I'll send them a check." Walt said off-handedly. "If you are really worried, just apply some Mist. I heard from Lady Artemis that you are practicing on masking your demigod scent right? Take this as
a chance to further that practice."

"Oh right, yeah," I muttered. Artemis did tell me to practice in noisy areas. What better place to do that than a popular tourist area like Boston?

"Now go get ready, Hunter. I'll give you your list once we arrive." Walt said. "Lynetta is already outside by the jeep. Remember Hunter- no weapons are to be used. If I find out that you summoned your bow or your knives that would be considered a failure."

I nodded, not bothering to ask how he knew about that. Artemis must have told him.

After changing into a collared shirt and jeans, and tossing on a backpack, Lynetta and Walt were already in the jeep. Walt was driving, and Lynetta gave me further details on the exam as Walt drove along. I was told that I had till 6 pm today to find 6 items. It was right now 11 am, so I had 7 hours. I was to handle my own transportation, and I was left to deal with any problems that may occur on my own. This exam, Lynetta told me, was created to simulate what a demigod on the run would experience, hence the no weapons or cash part.

Eventually after a 3 hour drive, I was eventually dropped off on the outskirts of town, with an empty backpack and list of items. Walt have already drove off, leaving me isolated.

I took a look at the list:

*Sony Panasonic Disk*

*Diamond Ring*

*4GB Micro Chips (3)*

*Aerosol Can*

*Fortune Cookies (2)*

*Assassin’s Creed III*

I gave a snort. "What kind of list is this? He's expecting me to rob a diamond ring? And why is a video game and fortune cookie on this list? He's insane."

I huffed indignantly before I shoved the list into my jean's pocket. The clock was ticking. Walt didn't specify where I could get these items, so it's a wild scavenger hunt for me. Based on the contents, it's best that I locate an electronics store, or a department store for the aerosol can.

I walked down the street, taking in the different stores and street signs, and committing them to memory. I needed to make sure I memorized my way back. I also concentrated on masking my demigod scent by thinking happy thoughts. There were a lot of people just passing by, and I was soon coming up to a plaza with a fountain in the middle, with a bunch of cupid statues squirting out water. Seeing Cupid reminded me of that wretched love goddess, and I had to struggle keeping my scent down.

Right then, I noticed someone carrying a *Micro Center* bag, and I quickly asked that person for directions. After about 10 minutes of walking, I saw how Micro Center was having a clean sale, and they had a whole pile of different GB Micro Chips near the front entrance. Making sure no one noticed me, I grabbed three of the 4GB ones in a tight fist and swiftly pocketed them. I made sure that the store manager was busy with customers before making the swipe. Hermes would be so proud.
I went further in, checking to see if they had a Sony Panasonic Disk. I was dismayed that they didn't.

Well, not all of them could be obtained that easily.

Again, I got out of the store quickly. The store manager still didn't notice anything thankfully. I took a look around: there weren't any video game or electronic stores. A fortune cookie would most likely be found in an Asian restaurant. I did hear that there was a Chinatown around here, but that was miles away. I wouldn't be able to get there in time walking, or on bike.

I was nearing the Boston harbor. There was a row of those umbrella tables, most of them occupied with couples that were eating out at this seafood restaurant. That was when I heard a commotion:

"You selfish, cheating jerk!" a young girl, just in her twenties, got up and screeched. All eyes almost instantly went towards her, and her cheating boyfriend, who looked just around her age. Judging from his appearance, he looked like one those college jocks: large frame, buzz-cut...he even had on a jersey.

"Wait, Lauren please!"

"I can't believe you! You dare cheat on me with that slut when our wedding is just two weeks away?! ARGH!" She promptly slapped her b-no, her ex. fiancé in the face twice before taking off her ring and throwing it at him. "Well, I hope you two have one hell of a time! WE'RE THROUGH!"

With that, 'Lauren' grabbed her purse and stomped out of the harbor angrily, just brushing a few centimeters past me. Her face was a puffy red. Once she was gone, the surrounding crowd started to make jeering comments at the cheat, but the drama was the last thing on my mind.

A diamond ring, he had to have a diamond ring! That's the kind of ring used for marriages! To think that an opportunity like this just opened up for me! Thank the fates! I guessed I wouldn't have to break into a jewelry store after all. I would not waste this chance!

I walked up to the cheat. He was clutching the ring in his hands, his face red with shame as the crowd continued to sprout some nasty comments about him. Surprisingly, he even looked like he was on the verge of crying. Oh good, that should make him easier to manipulate.

"You alright man?" I said to him softly, glancing down at the ring in his hands briefly. Yes, it was a diamond ring!

He sniffed, and looked at me warily. "What do you want? Are you here to insult me?"

"Nope, just looking out for you," I said, "I personally don't think you did anything wrong."

"R-really?"

"Really," I assured him. "Come on, you should get out of here- a change in scene would be better right? You can even talk it out to me if you want."

"W-why are being so nice to me?"

"It's because I want your ring. I thought, but out loud I said, "it's because I understand how you feel. Come on, you should get up! Where's that man pride, huh?"

"Since when did I become such a liar?"

"Yeah...you're right," the man said, sounding more confident. As we walked away from the harbor
and into a park, I noticed how the diamond ring was still clenched in his hand, much to my frustration. There were lesser people, but I would risk getting caught if I tackled him now. I had to bide my time until there wasn't anyone left to act as witness.

"So what happened? That girl there sure sounded mad." I commented. I got to let him keep talking. It'd be easier to guide him to where I wanted him to be when he was absorbed into the conversation.

"She sure was huh?" he muttered, and then he sighed. "I-I told her that I was with this old crush of mine. We were supposed to be married in two weeks, but I just couldn't bear the guilt you know? So against my better judgment, I decided to tell the truth, and this is what I get!"

I furrowed my eyes slightly, to give the impression that I was 'thoughtful' when I was actually scorning this douche for doing such a despicable thing. Who the heck cheated on a fiancé this close to a wedding day?

I forced myself to smile. "Then why did you cheat? It would have been easier for you if you just didn't."

"I know, but Liz was just so…it was too tempting to pass up," the asshole admitted.

My left eye twitched. What a selfish jerk indeed. It's because of guys like him that gave the rest of us males such a bad rep in front of Artemis and her hunters.

I checked my surroundings. An old lady had just disappeared from view, leaving no one else around. This guy must be really out of it or just plain stupid. Lesson number one people—never let a stranger take you somewhere isolated, especially when you had a valuable ring in your hand.

Oh well. His idiocy just made my job a lot easier.

"Hey kid, thanks for what you did there. I do feel a lot bet-!"

My right foot instantly collided hard against the side of his face. There was a loud bone-crushing sound before the cheat collapsed instantly. I went over and unfurled his fist, and quickly secured the diamond ring he had in his hand.

"Better? I doubt that," I said calmly to the unconscious asshole. Oh, that's going to leave a mark. "I didn't mean to hit you that hard, even if you deserved it. With your build, I didn't expect you to fall that easily. Though, I guess being a mortal instead of an Ares kid makes a big difference."

I rummaged through his pockets, and found a wallet, filled with some cash and ID. The cash wasn't much, unfortunately, but it's enough for my transportation.

"Next time, think before you cheat," I muttered as I stepped over the body and exited out of the park. I waved for a taxi, and soon enough, I was on my way to Chinatown.

-o-

Once I managed to sneak into the buffet, securing the two fortune cookies was a piece of cake. I grabbed a couple of them and dumped them in my backpack when the waitresses weren't looking. I blended in with the crowd with no effort at all.

I munched on some of the fortune cookies, making sure to leave two intact. I was starving. I used some of the cash to pay for a McDonald's Happy Meal. As I ate and walked, I gave a glance at a street clock— it was past 2 pm. I had roughly four hours to secure the last three items and make my way back.
So far, there weren't any monsters. That could only mean that my concentration was starting to pay off. Normally, I could never get this far into the city without some monster attacking me. I have now managed to blend in with the mortals.

I walked some more, later hopping on a tourist bus to see where my next destination should be. After 3 or 4 stops, I instantly got off when I noticed a shopping outlet. I walked into one of the first stores to check the time: it was now a little pass 3.

3 hours…I got to hurry. It would take at least one hour to get back the way I came with no distractions. So I only had 2 hours at the very most.

I noticed a Target store, and quickly entered. I located the aerosol can first, placing it in my backpack. However, my good luck decided to run out when one of the salespeople noticed my swipe.

Oh crap…I thought frantically. I snapped my fingers, praying to the gods that the Mist would work, but to no avail: the salesperson was still running towards me, calling for his buddies. It was times like these that I wished Thalia was here. She had better control over the Mist than me. I instantly grabbed the aerosol can back out and sprayed its contents on the salesperson's face. He cried out in pain, and I instantly took him down with a kick to his left calf.

I looked at the aerosol can with new found respect: no wonder girls carry pepper spray. With that, I shoved the can back into my backpack before running towards the electronics section. They might have a Sony Panasonic Disk somewhere, and if I was lucky enough, an Assassin's Creed III video game.

As if things couldn't get any worse, my panic had broken through my concentration and now monsters that I didn't notice before were transforming in front of my eyes. My scent must be flaring up for so many to come at me at once.

"SETH HUNTER!" one of the monsters screeched. I nearly gagged when I saw it's slimy, scaly face-Draacaena. The reptilian sea monster launched a wave of arrows and I slammed against a column of vacuum cleaners to dodge the attack, not that it provided much defense.

"You will pay for your mother's crimes!"

"Die, Hunter!"

You wish, I thought. I was fighting the urge to summon my weapons. I could take out so many of them if I had my bow. Instead, I just gritted my teeth and continued down the aisle, dodging mortals as they run in different directions, screaming at the top of their lungs. Whatever they were seeing, it definitely wasn't good.

I ran down yet another aisle, finally noticing the tag SONY and forced myself to slow down and check the boxes. My eyes quickly landed on the desired object, and I snatched it up quickly, running with my backpack half opened as I shoved it in hurriedly. I heard a bow being strung and I instantly ran to the side as arrows zoomed right past. I noticed a row of shopping carts deterring my path. I leaped over it with one hand before I kicked the row of carts to impede the monsters, which have grown in large numbers. Target now looked like it experienced a tornado.

Once I finally went past the automatic doors, I noticed an unlocked bike parked nearby and without a second thought, I took it. The owner, who was just a few meters away, ran at me screaming before his screams were drowned out by sirens and monsters.

So now we were back at square one.
Where in Hades could I find a video game?!

I was running out of time. I kept pedaling, my breathing uneven as I tried to keep a good distance away from the pack of monsters. I noticed some police cars have shown up ahead of me at the intersection, trying to cut off my escape route.

"Stop!" one of them said through a mike.

Predictably, I ignored him and proceeded to raise my front wheel upward. The police officer dove out of the way as I slammed my bike on top of a police cruiser. The glass screens were cracking as I rode through the bumpy cars before finally reached the ground on the other side. There were gunshots, and I heard small explosions go off when the monsters collided against the mortal cars, slowing them down just a bit.

I turned another corner, and a large red sign flashed in front of me. When my dyslexia finally let up, I read:

*Pandora's Cube Video Games*

No. Way.

I quickly got off my tattered bike, and instead of rushing into the store, I took that precious moment to calm down. Happy thoughts…I had to think happy thoughts. I inhaled and exhaled a couple times, even forced myself to close my eyes to erase the present predicament out of my mind. The loud rumbling noises were getting louder.

*Those are not monsters, I told myself. They are just a pack of animals that broke from the zoo. Yup, that's all it is. The situation will be handled. It's nothing to worry about.*

Slowly but surely, the loud stampede faded away. They had gone the other way. I was safe.

I let out a gasp, slumping down as my knees finally gave out. I checked my backpack, nothing appeared broken. After a few moments of rest, I quickly made my way towards the entrance, and opened the door.

The clearing was dark. There were only faint colored lights from the corners of the room. I scanned the numerous game racks. The store was relatively empty. That was bad news. I wouldn't be able to get away with the theft so easily. I did have some cash left from the cheat, but was it enough? I planned on using that for my ride back. Judging from the price tags, these video games were expensive. I may not know much about video games, but even I knew Assassin's Creed was a popular franchise. Their prices would definitely not be cheap.

"Looking for something in particular, young man?" a voice suddenly said.

I flinched slightly as I turned to see a dark haired lady wearing a sleeveless combat jacket behind the counter, her dark eyes looking at me idly. She had multiple piercings, her hair gelled back expertly, and there was even a tattoo I couldn't quite make out on the nape of her neck. Somehow, I felt angry, frustrated. Devious thoughts started sprouting into my mind. Then, as soon as those negative thoughts vanished, I felt the familiar aura of a deity. I took a step back out of caution. Why didn't I notice it at first?

"W-who are you?" I demanded, eying the dark-haired goddess warily. She only smiled wickedly, amused.

"So it is true," she murmured, "you really can tell us apart, Seth Hunter."
"Who are you?" I repeated. "What do you want with me?"

"I am your best friend," she told me, "what I am…drives your motivation and your goals. What I represent…is your meaning of existence."

"What you represent…" I whispered, trying to think through her cryptic message. She's not one of the twelve Olympians. Her aura, I realized, wasn't as vibrant as one of theirs. So she's probably a minor goddess, but which one?

I racked my brain for some names, and then I finally recognized her.

"You are Nemesis, goddess of balance and retribution." I stated calmly.

"Very good," she said, "I knew you would figure it out."

I swallowed heavily. I should have known nothing good happened by chance. Nemesis was one goddess I didn't want to piss off. If her recorded history was accurate, Nemesis was one who wouldn't hesitate to exact due payment, good or bad.

"I do not know how I caught your attention," I began, my voice steady, "but all I want is the Assassin's Creed III video game. If you would kindly give that to me, I'll be on my way."

"So you continue to feign ignorance?" Nemesis gave a chuckle. "Oh, you are certainly an interesting one, Seth Hunter. If you want your video game, then you will have to listen to what I have to say first. Do we have a deal?"

I hesitated. I didn't have much time left, and it's unlikely that I would stumble across another video game store.

"Fine," I said at last.

"Now that wasn't very hard, was it?" she asked, her eyes gleaming. I didn't answer. I didn't like the way she was looking at me, as if she was sizing me up. "I have kept an eye on you for quite a while, Seth Hunter. Your dilemma with your mother and Aphrodite intrigued me."

I widened my eyes. "How did you-!"

Nemesis rolled her eyes. "I am the goddess of revenge. I can easily sense any action carried out in my name, even amongst the gods. That is how my realm works. It's also the reason why I am so very interested in you. Don't worry, I haven't said a thing to anyone. Vengeance is a dish best served cold."

I didn't know what to say to that. Nemesis was starting to frighten me. I was glad I was on her good side.

"Okay, so you're interested in me. That still doesn't explain why you're keeping me here. What's your purpose for meeting me?"

Nemesis gave an eerie smile.

"I want you to become my champion."

-o-

Chapter End Notes
* There is such a place called Pandora's Cube Video Games. I nearly laughed aloud when I was searching up some good video game stores. The location isn't accurate, but for the sake of my plot, I changed it.
I want you to become my champion.

For a brief moment, I was speechless. I never expected any deity to offer me such a deal, and now the goddess of revenge had personally showed up and gave me one in a video game store.

I've heard of champions and patron deities, but I had no idea whether that practice still extended to present day. I've read all about them: Jason and Hera, Odysseus and Athena to name a few. To have a deity offer their patronage was a high honor. After my initial surprise diminished, I grew skeptical.

"Why did you choose me?" I asked.

"I can see your potential," Nemesis said, walking out of the counter. I noticed how she was wearing ripped black jeans and combat boots. There was a whip hanging on her side. "You're quite a promising 'demigod'. If your prophecy is anything to go by, I am certain you will bring about great change in the future, a great shift in the balance of power."

"But most importantly," Nemesis whispered, her dark eyes peered into my own closely. I tried not to flinch. "You and I have very similar ideals. It is these ideals that make you appealing to me. Unlike most demigods I've seen in the last century, there is no one, not even my own children, who understands the true meaning of sacrifice more than you, Seth Hunter."

"What do you mean by that?" I said quietly, my voice hushed.

She smiled and drew her head back, allowing me a moment to breathe. "Do you believe in luck, Seth Hunter?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't believe it actually exists, at least the concept of it." I told her. "The only 'luck' I've ever experienced is the result of my own hard work. Lady Tyche may be the goddess of luck, but she only offers her services sparingly to those who deserve it, which again proves that it is training and perseverance that leads to this fake notion called luck."

I believed in luck once, but ever since I discovered the existence of my damn prophecy, my beliefs took a pessimistic turn. There were Fates controlling our every move. Our very lives were only a thin length of string waiting to be cut. Sometimes, I even doubted if I had any free will. I never wanted to participate in that Quest to save Artemis, but look where that got me? Call me a cynic, but I rather faced the harsh truth than pretty pretenses.

"My thoughts exactly," Nemesis said, sounding pleased. "You are quite right, Seth Hunter. Good luck is a sham, an illusion. Without sacrifice (or hard work as you put it), one cannot hope to achieve something higher. There is no victory without sacrifice. There will be no success. That is the way things work in this world. In fact, Tyche and I collaborate very closely. While Tyche brings out the good things in life, I bring out the bad things to even it out."

"That…seems fair," I hesitated before commenting.
"Of course it is fair!" she exclaimed. "Fairness isn't without cruelty. It is an act of justice! I despise arrogance and pride. Those who have such demeaning qualities allow me my enjoyment of tearing them down to utter humiliation. Don't you wish to exact justice upon that haughty love goddess? Don't you wish to exact vengeance for the sake of your deceased family?"

"Of course I do!" I hissed, my mood turning sour at the reminder before I forced myself to calm down. Nemesis was clearly trying to rile me up. I couldn't get distracted. I must know her true intentions.

"What is in it for you, Lady Nemesis?" I replied, my tone distrusting. "What do you gain from using me as your champion?"

"I believe you are worthy enough to carry my message." Nemesis declared. "You are a wild card, Seth Hunter- the joker in the poker deck. With such freedom, all I ask is that you grant me recognition in your endeavors, complete the tasks that I assign occasionally, and continue to promote my ideals. In exchange…"

"I promise you my aid against the love goddess." Nemesis whispered. I hitched a breath. "Trust me when I say that I always keep my promises. As your patron, it will be my duty to look out for you. You will be charged in my care, and I will make sure that no one- whether they are mortal, demigod, or deity- messes with us."

"I see," I muttered, taking that moment to think it over.

Nemesis would be a good ally, especially when it involved my future quarrel with Aphrodite. I needed all the divine help I could get. Apollo couldn't do much on this matter, and Artemis was kept in the dark about this one. If I had Nemesis' help…then my revenge would be fulfilled, and even after that happens, I would still have Nemesis acting as my benefactor.

However, like every choice, there was also a downside. Nemesis was shady. Her intentions may not always be crystal clear, and according to the myths, she had a way of fulfilling her end of the deal that usually involved a lot of pain and hurt. So what did being 'in her care' entail for me? It's unlikely that she was going to just step in and fix all my problems with a wave of her hand. No…from our conversation, I could tell Nemesis was more practical. She would let me handle the problems, but offer me some advantage over my enemies.

Then, there was my own conviction. I did not like depending on anyone. Patron or not, the closest person I trust was myself, and even then, I still had my self-doubts. Only Percy, Annabeth, Will, and Lee were close to gaining my full trust. Grover too, though I haven't had much time to talk to him since he's busy finding Pan. Thalia was also making her way onto my list as time passed on.

Other than those few selected individuals, I hold everyone else at an arm's length. Many of them I treat as friends or allies (like the Demeter and Hermes kids), and some like Clarisse, we only got along when we struck a good bargain. Notice that my list only consisted of demigods and one satyr. There were no gods that I trusted. Artemis and Aphrodite were obvious reasons. Apollo was a god I respected and admired, but it did not mean I trusted him. Ever since he pulled that stunt, I've grew wary of him. He only looked out for me since I had Artemis' favor. If I somehow offended Artemis and he caught hold of it, it's obvious whose side he's on. He made that point very clear last time we met.

Besides, last I checked, the feelings were mutual: gods didn't trust demigods. So why should they expect any trust from us?

Unfortunately, as much as I wished to remain unnoticed by the gods, my stupid prophecy made that
impossible. I was extremely glad I wasn't a Big Three kid for this reason because they attracted attention like flies even without a prophecy. I could at least slip by unnoticed by monsters now, and enemies might even underestimate me since I didn't have that 'Big Three' title. Not that I mind, it's just another advantage for me.

As I continued to think through my pros and cons, something crucial surfaced. "Are you really giving me a choice in the matter?" I said narrowly.

Nemesis smirked. "Good question. Am I giving you a choice? Now that really depends."

I felt my face deadened. "Depends?"

"It is in my best interest that you accept my offer genuinely. A patron-champion relationship will only work when both sides willingly cooperate with the other. Of course, I could always force you into it, but the partnership won't be the same, and it won't be as strong or sacred. Ultimately, it depends on whether or not I want a strong partnership with you, Seth Hunter, and I do desire a strong partnership."

"So if I happen to refuse…" I noticed how Nemesis gave a slight frown. "Will you just coerce me into it anyway?"

"Again, that depends." Nemesis murmured. "Are you refusing me?"

She appeared curious. I didn't sense any threatening undertone belying that question. Instead of answering, I asked another critical question.

"There is a war coming," I said ominously. "I've heard from one source that many of the minor deities have turned to the Titans. I'm not asking about your allegiance, but if we happen to be on different sides… will that impact our partnership?"

"I am all about balance and equality, Seth Hunter," Nemesis answered. "For me, there is no such thing as a 'side'. If I do join one 'side'—it is only because I see that option more suited towards my aims. As for your inquiry, our partnership will not be affected. Patronage is viewed as a sacred bond, almost if not more binding than swearing on the River Styx. Even if I were to join the Titans, I am forbidden to ever harm or put you in harm's way."

"Is that so?" I said quietly. "Very well, I have made a decision."

"Oh?"

Nemesis brought up many good points, and she unknowingly put to rest many of my worries. If deities hold these partnerships as sacred, then I was guaranteed to have Nemesis on my side without fear of her deluding me. I could not survive in this world for long without some solid help from the gods. At least with Nemesis' aid, other gods would think twice before messing with me.

"Your terms are satisfactory. I will accept your offer of patronage." I said calmly. Nemesis smiled.

"I'm glad to hear it." Nemesis said. She raised a hand, and a bit hesitantly, I took it. Almost immediately, I felt a searing pain on the underside of my right wrist. There was a reddish and silvery glow, and I felt something seeping into me through that contact. Slowly, the pain diminished and when Nemesis finally released my hand, I noticed a small black mark, like a tattoo embedded on my wrist.

It was a set of scales, with swords crisscrossing them. *I tried not to wince when I saw it. It almost
appeared defiant, like it was saying that I was owned by someone.

So I sacrificed my freedom for the sake of self-preservation, I thought morbidly. I guess I do understand her more than I like.

With that, Nemesis snapped her fingers, and I recognized the Assassin's Creed cover that appeared in her hand. She handed it to me, and I placed it gently into my backpack.

"You will not regret your choice, Seth Hunter." she told me. She almost sounded sincere. "Now that game there is one I particularly enjoyed. I do love it when the mortals decide to give me some spotlight."

I suddenly heard the sound of an engine, and I noticed a flashy red sports car outside the front entrance.

"Your transportation," she told me. "Just take a seat in the back, and the car will take you where you need to go."

I nodded as I opened the side door. I noticed how the car appeared to be on auto. There was no driver.

"By the way," Nemesis said behind me. "Nice job snatching that diamond ring."

"How did you..." I started. When I turned around to question this, Nemesis had already disappeared. When I processed that sentence a second time, I chuckled to myself quietly, finally getting its true meaning.

I gave a sigh. Good luck really is an illusion.

-0-

The sports car soon came to a stop.

I didn't even do anything at all. All I did was state my destination and the car immediately took off at high speed. Judging by how fast it was going, we must have gained like a bunch of speed tickets on the way. It was a miracle we didn't get into any accidents.

Lynetta was there, this time standing beside her Prius. She gave a suspicious look when she noticed the red sports car, which was already leaving behind a trail of dust once I got out of it.

"Do I want to know?" she told me, sighing. I shrugged.

"I kind of got some help on the way. So did I make it in time?"

She nodded. "Walt is expecting you back at the house."

The next few hours went by swiftly. I gave my report to Walt. I eventually told him about my encounter with Nemesis, though I didn't tell him about her offer of being my patron. I finally handed him the bag of items as requested. Walt took a brief glance over the items, and when he noticed how all of them were still intact, he gave a nod of approval. Lynetta took the two fortune cookies and tossed me one.

"Enjoy," Lynetta said. She opened up the wrapper and took a bite. "I do love fortune cookies."

I blinked. "Wait, what..."
"I'll be taking these immediately," Walt replied. He had the Panasonic disk, aerosol can, 4GB Micro Chips, and diamond ring all bundled up in a bag. "Well done, Hunter. Without you, I wouldn't have got the items I needed in time to fix my toys. It sure beats waiting for the FedEx Truck. I'll be sure to compensate them."

"Now hold on a sec," I said, "you're telling me…that this exam was meant to help you get your ingredients in time? You sent me out there completely unarmed to act as your delivery boy?!" Walt shrugged.

"That is exactly what I did." Walt stated, unabashed. "Deal with it." I gave a look of disbelief.

That's it, Walt Forger is officially crazy. I thought. How does Lynetta deal with him?

"It's not like I haven't thought about you too. As a reward Hunter, you can have this." Walt said. He threw the Assassin's Creed game to me swiftly. "I'm a hard-core Ezio fan you know? I've heard mixed reviews on this one. Tell me your opinion once you finish it."

Huh?

"Wait, I don't understand," I finally managed to say when I calmed down. "You're telling me to go play a video game?"

"You do have free time today," Lynetta pointed out. "The gaming equipment is in the left corner room of the basement."

"Yes, I know." I said. I always had free time once I completed an exam or mission. "But video games?"

"What are you complaining about, Hunter?" Walt muttered. "You're a teenager aren't you? Don't most boys your age be thrilled about playing video games?" He muttered under his breath in Latin, something about me being too difficult and picky.

"I don't play video games," I said. "I don't see what's so appealing about them. It's just a bunch of computer graphics designed to let killing appear enjoyable. What's so good about that?"

"That is why it's so appealing!" Walt exclaimed. "I don't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for you, Hunter. Are you seriously telling me that you never played a video game before?"

"Pretty much, unless you count that Halo game in the Lotus Casino," I thought aloud. "I'm sure you knew that I lived in an orphanage almost all my life before moving to Camp Half-Blood. We didn't have the luxury to buy expensive games like these, and I was too busy at Camp to bother. It's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal he says," Walt repeated sarcastically. "That's it! Your new assignment is to finish that game in one week! No protests!" He added when I was about to do just that. "You are really missing out on a lot of things, Hunter. That is just sad."

"I thought you are a trainer!" I argued. "Not some video game addict."

"I am a lot of things, Hunter." Walt said. There was something in his tone that I couldn't quite identity, something ominous and dark. "Now just do what I tell you. Trust me, this 'assignment' won't even seem like an assignment. Try to act your age this once."

Try to act your age...
I scoffed mentally. Act my age? Maybe if I was a mortal or even a demigod, and not this, then maybe I could 'act my age'. How was a fifteen year old boy supposed to act then? Was I really so unlike a 'teenager' just because I didn't play video games? I didn't get his reasoning.

"Fine," I said, "I'll give Assassin's Creed a try. Maybe I'll even try Mario Cart! Pokémon! Whatever."

"That's the spirit!" Walt said, smirking. "Now I need to get these into my room. Lynetta, why don't you help him set up? You can start with the other training tomorrow morning." With that said, Walt quickly left the room with items in tow.

After Lynetta help me set up the game, I had the gaming consul in hand as the screen flickered. Assassin's Creed III started up with this character called Desmond and gave a brief recap about Assassins and Templars, this thing called an 'Animus', and how the protagonist was trying to avert the 2012 Apocalypse. I guessed the plot was alright in terms of originality. It even gave a brief history lesson on the American Revolution. I nearly laughed when 'Juno' appeared.

Time actually went by faster than I thought. The game was about to shift from Haytham's perspective when my eyes started to feel drowsy. I checked the time, and I was shocked that it was already the end of the day.

_Just as well,_ I thought as I took out the game and closed the plasma TV. _I don't want to end up too addicted...though I guess Assassin's Creed turned out more entertaining than I first thought._

I got settled into bed after I took a brief shower. The weather was getting nicer. The nights weren't so chilly like before. Somehow, my sleeping habits were also improving. I didn't know if it's because my insomnia was cured or because my fear of Kronos invading my mind disappeared, but I was starting to sleep more regularly. I could tell just by looking at my reflection. My face didn't appear as haggard, and the dark circles under my eyes were slowly dimming away.

Of course, just because my insomnia decided to take a vacation, it did not make waking up at 6 am any easier.

"We will be starting a new area of training," Lynetta announced, her voice echoing throughout the room. I stifled a yawn, my eyes protesting against the bright light. I was dressed hurriedly in sweats and plain T-shirt. My dark auburn hair was in such a mess it would give Aphrodite nightmares.

"I have decided that you are ready for marksmanship." I literally gaped.

"YES!" I said loudly. I even pumped a fist in the air. I was _that_ excited. "Finally! So which kind of guns will I get to work with? Hand guns? Rifle? Shot gun?"

"You'll start with this," Lynetta told me. She plucked one of the smallest firearms on the wall and threw it towards me. I caught it, and noticed it was a small measly _pistol_. "You won't be firing it either. You will first learn the theory work behind each of the different guns we have here, starting with the pistol. Then, you will eventually be timed on how fast you break it apart and assemble them together."

"Oh." I didn't bother hiding my disappointment. That sounded so..._so boring._

"Once you get past the theory work, I believe everything else that follows will come naturally to you." Lynetta said.
"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

"Your abilities are similar to a child of Apollo," she said. "Your mother and Lord Apollo's skill with archery grants their children a natural affinity with long-range weapons. Marksmanship, obviously, falls under that category. This affinity also allows Apollo kids to become talented athletes since most sports also involve trajectories. I am assuming that you also have this skill?"

I nodded. I remembered how I would play baseball when I was younger. I always had a good aim when pitching, or when I was batting, I always managed to hit the ball exactly how I wanted it. Then, I tried my hand with basketball at Camp Half-Blood. Will always managed to beat me due to our difference in height, much to my frustration.

"I'm sure you will master marksmanship quite easily due to this advantage." Lynetta informed. "It was like that with the Apollo kid I trained previously. Though, you might have to handle the recoil a couple times before getting it completely."

"So all I have to do is get the dull stuff out of the way huh?" I said.

Lynetta nodded. "In other words."

"Alright, then," I said. "Let's get started."

For the next hour and a half, Lynetta explained the basics of each gun. I was given the assignment to memorize gun parts and terms. Physics also played a large role in determining wind speed and vector qualities. I practiced loading and unloading bullets into the pistol I was given under a time limit. By the time the exercise was complete, it was sad to say that the time difference between my first and last try wasn't to my satisfaction, but since it was only my first day, Lynetta simply told me I was being too harsh on myself.

"I'm not being too harsh," I told her. "It's just my way of improving."

"Setting a high standard is good," Lynetta agreed, "but setting impossible goals like that...you do know that most of the goals you've told me are nearly impossible to accomplish in a single lifetime?"

"That's the whole point," I said, looking at her sternly. "It's so I'll always have something to occupy my time and energy with. Even if I don't achieve it, I'll at least land somewhere closer to my desired target than before and still improve in the process."

"Can you not come up with reasonable ones instead?" she asked. "Achieve those, and then create more doable ones later."

"Why should I do that?" I questioned. "If I know that I will achieve it eventually, that isn't a goal. A goal should be something more...something more eternal. Creating these short-term goals are only stepping stones. I rather skip that whole process and focus on the bigger target."

"Stepping stones are there for a reason," Lynetta said. "They are meant to monitor and record your process more accurately. It's also meant as a reward system. Don't you wish to experience that feeling of accomplishment?"

"Of course I do," I said quietly, "but that 'feeling of accomplishment' is only a delusion in the end, Lynetta. It is only a dream, a fantasy. I rather not give myself such false notions of success."

Lynetta frowned. "What...do you mean by that?"

"What I meant, is that weakness always overpowers strength." I answered. "If I can count how many
flaws I have, I'll need a whole group of people to help count them, and even then, that is not enough. There's just too many. Some of them I could fix if I put forth the effort…but others are just a part of who I am. Just like my fatal flaw for instance. Those, no matter how much I despise them, can never be erased. Having a sense of accomplishment is only a mask, Lynetta, a temporary thing. I don't want to be blinded by such petty things."

"That's a…unique perspective," Lynetta murmured. She had a slightly troubled gaze when she looked at me, as if she couldn't believe what I was saying. "I never knew you could be so…"

"Cynical? Pessimistic?" I guessed. She gave a nod.

"Right then, I actually forgot that you are younger than me," Lynetta admitted. "Sometimes, the way you speak and act, the things you believe…where did you develop these beliefs from?"

I gave a smile.

"Experience, Lynetta. That's where I got them."

-o-

Chapter End Notes

*The set of scales and crisscrossed swords is the symbol of Nemesis. I'm not sure if the swords are accurate since Nemesis is described to carry a whip, but that is the information I got from Ethan Nakamura's wiki page.
Mindset

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lynetta didn't say anything else after that.

I didn't know what I did to have her give me the sudden silent treatment. I knew Athena kids could be sensitive about being wrong, but did I prove her wrong? All I did was state my own opinion. I didn't rebuke her or anything, so I didn't think that was the case. She had her eyebrows scrunched up; her dark grey eyes were stern and deep in thought. She would sometimes look my way when she thought I wasn't noticing. Whenever I did manage to catch her in the act, she would shrug it off and give me more instructions on my marksmanship training, just to keep me occupied.

What bothered me most was that Lynetta actually appeared worried, which was very unlike her. Normally, Lynetta was nonchalant. She would sometimes give a few pointers here and there, even a compliment if I was lucky enough…but worry? What did I do to get that? Whatever it was, I soon put the 'problem' out of my mind. I had other things I needed to handle, and I couldn't do much about it anyway.

My first session with marksmanship ended on a quiet note. My homework was to memorize the terms and the pistol's parts and functions, and I would be timed again tomorrow. Lynetta told me she would be recording my process. Once I reached a desired time, I would move on to a different gun. This procedure would repeat until I went through all the different types available. When that was over, then I could put those guns to use. It's very dull, but at least I got the boring stuff out of the way first.

Currently, I was on a treadmill, pacing myself casually as I ran through a mental schedule in my head.

*After another 20 minutes of running, I will need to head to the music room and practice for an hour. Walt also wanted me to sweep the hallway and clean out some of the empty guest rooms. That's about 3 hours of work. Lynetta mentioned a tutoring session in the afternoon, so that's at least 1 hour. What else? Oh yeah, I have a sword fight against Lynetta today at 3 pm, so I got to warm up before that, and I need to prepare dinner tonight. I wonder what they want to eat this time…* 

Just another typical day for me. Only difference was that I needed to set some time aside for Assassin's Creed since Walt decided to give me a deadline.

Soon, my exercise came to an end. I got off the treadmill and wiped sweat off my face and neck with a spare towel. Looking down at my drenched shirt, I decided that I needed to change so I headed towards my room.

When I had just got out of the basement and walked down the hallway, I heard Walt mutter:

"Are you sure about this, Lynetta? If you are right, then it's best that we let Lady Artemis know."

"Yes, I am." Lynetta said. "Though it is only the first time it's happened, I've been around you long enough to notice it."

*What are they talking about? I thought. What could be so important that Artemis needs to be informed? I took a quiet step closer, just so I could maybe see their faces. From the small crack of the doorway, I noticed Lynetta's back was towards me, and I could make out a little of Walt's scrunched*
up face.

"It is only speculation," Lynetta continued quietly. "A theory for now. It may not happen again, but he just seemed so... different... different, but also the same. I can't even put it to words. The feeling was just so off."

I narrowed my eyes in confusion. What was Lynetta talking about? Off... did our conversation earlier really spook her out that much? I didn't understand. What did I do to cause Lynetta- who could shoot a monster in the face without blinking an eye- to have such a reaction? What's worse was that she decided to confide it with Walt behind my back. I was the root of this problem. If she had such concerns, couldn't she just tell me so I could avoid it? Fix it?

Walt took a moment to answer, his expression slightly distressed.

"We'll keep a closer watch on him for now," he finally said. "It's not like it's harmful. If there are any more of these episodes, we'll inform Lady Artemis, if she doesn't know already. Did he... did Hunter realize any of this?"

I saw Lynetta shake her head. "No, and this only proves my theory further. Seth doesn't seem to be aware that he's doing it. I'll look into it some more. This would make a very interesting case."

_Huh?_

Okay, now my mind was in a complete jumble. Before I could organize my thoughts, I heard Lynetta backing up slowly and about to exit the room. Instead of going straight for the spiral staircase, I retraced my steps and pretended that I just exited out of the basement. I rubbed my face with my towel absentmindedly as I coincidentally met Lynetta in the hall.

I greeted her. "Hello, Lynetta. We have a tutoring session today right?"

She stared at me, almost with a suspicious edge. For a moment, I thought Lynetta might have seen through my pretense, but she only lowered her gaze.

"Yes," she said blandly. "Have you read up the extra chapter on the Renaissance?"

I nodded. We were going through World History right now. "I have and..." Lynetta raised an eyebrow.

"I-is something wrong?" I asked gently.

"What?" Her voice sounded a little harsh. I inwardly flinched.

"It's just... you seem a little under the weather?" I clarified. "Did something happen or... did I do something to offend you...?"

Lynetta sighed and shook her head. "It's nothing for you to worry about, Seth." _Liar..._ I thought inwardly. I didn't even need to tune in my hearing. Lately, I've been concentrating on enhancing my sight and hearing. Now, I could hear Lynetta's uneven heartbeat without even trying.

She's hiding something, something that I was unaware of doing. To think such a feat was possible... I shrugged. "Okay."

I moved past her and I was just about halfway up the stairs when Lynetta called out to me.
"Seth, I…"

"Yes?"

"Do you remember that conversation we had earlier?" she asked me. "The one about setting goals?"

"Yeah. What about it?" I asked. Was she finally going to tell me what's wrong?

She muttered something under her breath, something like 'So he does remember…'

She said aloud. "I only want to compliment you on your argument. You brought up many good points that I've never considered before. You would make my mother proud."

"I get that a lot," I admitted. "You know, one of your half-siblings is actually one of my close friends. Her name's Annabeth Chase. I think you two would get along if you ever decide to drop by the camp."

Lynetta looks thoughtful. "Is that right? Last time I've been to that camp, I remember getting along with my cabin mates quite nicely. Is Chiron doing okay? Is Mr. D still there?"

"Unfortunately," I muttered. "He still continues to get our names wrong on purpose you know? Chiron is alright. When's the last time you've been to camp?"

"I'm not sure…I left when I was only fourteen I think. So it's been ten years." she said, startled at her own words. "Ever since I came here, I never left."

"Never left," I repeated. "You mean you never once visited Camp Half-Blood?" She nodded.

"It's complicated," she told me. "Besides, I'm a grown woman Seth. I'm no longer a teenager. Camp Half-Blood may have been my home once, but I've moved on. Someday, you will share that same experience."

*If I manage to survive long enough,* I thought morbidly. I only nodded.

With that, Lynetta turned on her heels and headed down the hall, leaving a wistful air in her absence.

-o-

The rest of the day went by quickly. When your mind was preoccupied with endless stuff, time seemed to fly out the window. I had the sword fight against Lynetta. This time, I was able to land a couple of minor strikes on her, but I still had a long way to go before I could actually beat her.

Chores were a mindless task as always. However, this afternoon, when I was cleaning out my wardrobe, I found a familiar slip of paper in my black trench coat pocket.

It was the Virginia address Hermes gave me.

For a moment, I thought about looking up the address on the internet. Who knew what awaited me at this location? I could be walking into some death trap. Some other part of me wanted me to uphold its secrecy. Hermes had explicitly told me that I would know once I knew what questions to ask, but that was just so vague.

In the end, I decided to do both.

I typed in Google Maps. I could at least get a sneak peek at the aerial view without spoiling it too much right?
Once I finished typing in the address on the laptop Walt provided for me, I zoomed in on the image. Once the image became clearer, I frowned.

It was in the middle of a suburb, a neighborhood. I could tell with the many houses surrounding it, but the arrow was pointing at what looked like a regular house you pass by any day. It wasn't too large, and it wasn't too small either judging from the roof size. It didn't seem like the place monsters would hang out.

*Who in Hades lived there?*

I shut my laptop quickly. I couldn't look into this any further. There must be a reason why Hermes didn't tell me who lived there, and I have a feeling the Fates didn't like being cheated.

*Who cares about the Fates? That voice told me. It's your life. It's okay to be safe.*

Even so, I didn't like this feeling of dread, like it was telling me that what I was doing was wrong. Curiosity killed the cat. There's a reason why that saying lasted for so long.

I placed the laptop away, puzzled by what I discovered. I got out of the room swiftly once I finished cleaning it up. I had a tutoring session I needed to attend.

-o-

"Seth, what is the definition of *Humanism*?" Lynetta asked.

"It's a term describing how people credit individualism over religion." I explained. "I think a good example would be the Renaissance artists Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Instead of claiming that their work comes from God, they take the recognition for themselves."

"Very good," Lynetta said, "but there is another definition. What is it?"

I thought about it. "It's...about the collection of Ancient Greek and Roman teachings. Basically, they use those to monitor and correct their current books or scroll things."

Lynetta appeared pleased. "I see your memory is still sharp. For next week, we will be going over the Age of Exploration. Prior to that, I want you to memorize this list of terms and examples, and major events." She handed me a packet of notes. I inwardly sighed. The length was exactly the same as last time. I was never going to have any time to myself was I? I wondered if public institutions gave out this much work.

"We will also be going through the Electric and Magnetic Fields for Physics next week," Lynetta added. "As for Biology, make sure you read the Embryology Chapter." I instantly groaned. "It's something you must learn, Seth. I do not care how much you loathe it or believe it to be useless. It's a subject commonly taught in high school."

"It's not like I want to major in that stuff," I grumbled.

"Treat it like a Gen Ed requirement," she said, and then she narrowed her eyes, appearing confused. "I don't see how you are offended by this topic. It's not like you are any different from us."

"What do you mean?"

"Although your birth is unique, it's not like you are much different from other demigods," Lynetta pointed out. "You have abilities designated by your parent, you have a fatal flaw. Your physical appearance may be very similar to Lady Artemis, but I've met other demigods who look nearly
I sighed, and placed my pencil down. "I also have a friend who looks just like his dad too, but his situation and mine are still on different levels. Lady Athena may be like Artemis when it comes to children, but you at least have a dad and half-siblings. You don't have to deal with being 'different' on your own. Maybe if I had a...I don't know, maybe a little sister? It wouldn't be such a hassle since I'd at least have someone who shares the same experience as me. Then again, since the sibling is a girl...maybe she would still have an advantage over me. She wouldn't have to live up to such a high expectation."

"You think Lady Artemis doesn't approve of you." She didn't phrase it as a question, but a statement of fact.

"I'm a guy," I said. "As if that's not enough, my past history with her proves that I can be the worse of 'my kind'. You only met me after we reconciled. Before, I was this rash, stubborn idiot. I was just so blind. Looking back, I don't know how Artemis tolerated me. I was so nasty. Ms. Lewinsky would probably wash my mouth with soap if she heard half of the things I've said about Artemis. If I were in her shoes, I wouldn't know how I would deal with myself without blowing up."

"So those goals you told me," Lynetta began, "like the one about surpassing Artemis. Are you trying to compensate?"

There was a brief moment of silence.

"I am," I said finally. My voice felt so hollow. This was the first time I actually said it out loud. This place wasn't Camp Half-Blood, where I needed to worry about the rumor mill, so I supposed it was safe enough to say it. "It's one of my few reasons for living. I don't know if I'll ever achieve it, but it's what's keeping me going. Do you mind if you don't tell anyone about this? I rather not let this get out."

I especially didn't want Artemis to find out. I didn't want her to know that my willingness for reconciliation was the result of my own guilt. Apollo told me how she hoped to get along with me better, and I was giving her the chance as promised. If she knew my true reasons, Artemis would feel cheated, and rightly so. If it weren't for this guilt, I probably wouldn't ever associate with Artemis if I could help it. It's not like I was still angry at her, it's more like her very presence just evoked something bitter inside me, something I rather forget. It wasn't Artemis' fault. She couldn't help it, which was why I remained silent.

"I won't. It's not my place to tell," Lynetta promised. She decided to sit down across from me, placing the history book she was holding onto the table. "Seth, there's something I wanted to discuss with you out of this. Do you know that your self-esteem is much lower than anyone I've ever met?"

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Your self-esteem is too low," she repeated. "So low that if you were to be checked for mental therapy, the psychiatrist would have labeled you suicidal."

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. "Are you doubting my mental capability?"

"No," she answered, "I know you can think clearly and carefully. The problem lies in your purpose and motivation. While your motivation to fight is strong, your reasons for that strength are not."

"Just what are you getting at?"
"What do you gain from comparing yourself with Lady Artemis?" she asked me. "You know that Artemis is on a whole other level, one that is impossible for demigods to surpass. The only ones who managed to reach that position so far are Hercules and Lord Dionysus, and their given godhood is what allowed them to close the gap. You also insist on being labeled 'weak' when your skills say otherwise. While I find that humble trait very rare in our generation, it's not doing you any favors when it comes to your self-esteem."

"I only insist that I'm weak only because it's the truth. I don't see any worth in comparing myself with my peers. Demigods are at the bottom of the chain, with the Primordial, Titans, and gods at the top. Why should I focus on surpassing them, when there are more powerful beings out there?"

"It's unrealistic," Lynetta argued. "I know you told me that you rather skip the 'stepping stone' process, but don't you see Seth? Your goals are the root of the problem! You know that they are impossible to accomplish, and because of that, you will be left with nothing but disappointment. That unavoidable result is sapping away your self-esteem and confidence."

I took a moment to digest what she said.

"I suppose that's something I have to give up," I replied. "I can't be perfect at everything, and I cannot will my mindset to change so easily. You can call it another flaw I am unable to fix. But if you insist on having me lower my standards, then I'll focus on surpassing Artemis' hunters for now. At least with their immortality boost, they will still prove to be a challenge. Is that fine?"

Lynetta gave a hesitant nod. "It's a start. How about this? Can you at least name 10 things you are proud of? It's been over four months since you came to live with us. I'm curious of what you would say."

I scoffed. "Lynetta, I may be younger than you, but that doesn't mean I'm a little kid."

"Just name 10," she insisted. "Then, I'll let the matter drop."

"Only 10?"

She nodded.

"Alright," I said. "Well let's see: I'm proud of being a good brother figure to Lucy and the other kids, a helper to Ms. Lewinsky, and being a good listener for my friends at camp. Um, I am proud of being able to swallow my pride and ask the hunters to forgive me back then. I'm proud of my new cooking skills. I can even make a whip cream pie without destroying the crust. How many is that now?"

"Five. You're halfway there."

"Five? Okay, I'm also proud of making such good friends. I wouldn't have lasted without them." I said with a smile. "I'm proud of my new habits. Thanks to Walt, I think I'm a lot more organized and tidy."

Lynetta smiled slightly. "I would be surprised if you weren't. You're at seven."

"Three more…I'm proud of that new score I got on Assassin's Creed," I suddenly mentioned. "You know, I think I change my mind. That video game really is entertaining. It's a nice way to kill time."

"I actually prefer the Final Fantasy series," she told me. "You should give them a try."

"Sure," I said. "Anyway, um, I'm proud of my upbringing. I wouldn't be who I am today without
Ms. Lewinsky and the kids. I really owe them a lot. As for the last one…"

"I'm proud of being independent." I said finally. "I'm glad that I can stand on my own, and not depend on anyone else."

*I'm also glad that love won't hinder me,* I thought snidely. *I won't be controlled by Aphrodite.*

"That's my ten," I said.

"That's quite a list, kind of…different from others I've heard over the years," Lynetta muttered.

"What's different?"

"Usually, the first things the student would mention would be their abilities," she said. "Yet you never mentioned your skill with archery, combat, or even your improvement in swordsmanship. May I ask why?"

"Oh, that's easy," I said off-handedly. "It's because those skills aren't mine to begin with."

"What?" Lynetta said, confused.

"Those are Artemis' abilities," I clarified. "I can't be proud of those skills because they belong to her right? That would be like *stealing.* The reason I can fight so well is because Artemis is the one who offered me her talents. She could have chosen to take them away or not give them to me. It's the same with Apollo too. I would never have my music and medical talent if it weren't for him. If demigods are proud of inheriting their parents' abilities, good for them, but I know better than to do that."

"I see," Lynetta muttered. "Very well, we will end here for today."

Without further adieu, I got up quickly and exited the room. I had a meal to plan, and I found myself eager in continuing my Assassin's Creed game.

-o-

"So did Hunter have any more of those episodes?" Walt asked. He was sitting behind his mahogany desk while Lynetta was leaning against a pillar in his study. They had just finished dinner, and their charge was currently in the basement playing video games.

"He did not," Lynetta told him. "I also learned that his memory is still perfectly intact, so my theory might be wrong."

"Really?" Walt said curiously. "That's quite a development, but you might still be right in a way."

"In a way," Lynetta relented. "There's something about Seth that we need to discuss, Mr. Forger. It's about his mindset."

"What do you mean?" he questioned.

"His way of thinking is troubling, especially at his age." Lynetta admitted. "Given his circumstances, I suppose it's not unfounded. It's not wrong, but it isn't right either. Today, I asked him to give me a list of ten things he is proud of. He gave me ten things, but his list was unlike any other demigod before him."

"How?"
Lynetta filled him in. When Lynetta finally finished, Walt also appeared concerned.

"That's...odd," he muttered when he heard their last bit of conversation.

"Isn't it?" Lynetta said; her tone incredulous. "Seth's way of thinking has gotten so twisted that I was almost convinced that they are right. I don't know if he had those views in the beginning or not, but did Lady Artemis or his friends not notice this?"

"I don't think the fault lies in his peers, but rather Hunter himself." Walt answered. "From my observations, Hunter is rather secretive. He doesn't share much about himself, at least not willingly. If it weren't for the reports I've gotten from Chiron or the Olympians, I would barely know anything about him."

"That's true," she agreed.

"Every person's beliefs and outlook all begin at the origin," Walt said. "Our origins shape us into the people we are and will become. Hunter still hasn't fully recovered from his past trauma. Adding on his major inferiority complex and botched up relationship with Lady Artemis and her hunters, I'm surprised that Hunter can still get his act together after all that."

"So what do you suggest?" Lynetta asked.

"I was thinking about Hunter's next exam," Walt told her. "I had wanted to do something environmentally challenging, but I couldn't decide how to go about it. Now, I think you just found the solution to my dilemma."

Lynetta thought for a while before her mind picked up on the best possible choice.

"Oh. Are you sure Seth is ready though?" Lynetta asked. "We can't predict what might happen."

"Whether he's ready or not doesn't matter," Walt said. "It's time Hunter focused on what is right in front of him instead of what's behind him. I'm going to be the push he needs to recover."

"So the next exam is going to be…?"

Walt gave a wicked smirk. "We're going to reenact the St. Clair's catastrophe."

Chapter End Notes

This is kind of a filler chapter, but I thought I needed to add in further characterization.
Lynetta had a bad feeling about this.

They were all currently in Walt's jeep, driving to the site where Seth’s next exam was taking place. Walt had spent the last 2 weeks preparing this one. It had taken them awhile to find a suitable location that wouldn't attract too much notice, but in the end they found one. The previous owner had decided to sell his old property and Walt paid for it immediately. Once the property was officially in their hands, Walt had set to work with the help of his automatons.

She took a glance at the front mirror, noticing how Seth had his shoulders sagged. His hair covered his eyes completely, revealing no hint of what he was mentally going through. She could tell that his hands were over his lap, and his back was bare. This time, Walt told him to use only the weapons Artemis had given him, just to test how long he could keep them materialized. She noticed that Seth was wearing gloves, and she slightly relaxed for his sake.

The jeep came to a stop. Just 10 meters ahead of them was the three story family home, now filled with a bunch of dangerous devices. They got out of the car quietly.

Seth stood beside her, his eyes narrowing. He directed his gaze towards Walt, his eyes demanding answers.

"This is a little setup that I personally prepared," Walt told him. "Your task is to find three stuffed dummies—one on each floor of the house, and lower them by the fire escapes you see on the side. You will be given exactly 15 minutes to get all three dummies and yourself out of the house."

"What's the catch?" he muttered.

"The house is filled with traps, so be sure to watch where you step," Walt informed him. Then, he took out the activation switch from his pocket. "Also…"

He pressed the button, and there was a loud explosion. Seth flinched and stepped back, his face paling at the sight of the burning house.

"Try not to burn yourself."

Seth didn't reply. Lynetta noticed how his clenched hands were trembling.

"Your exam starts…NOW!" Walt announced.

To her surprise, Seth immediately took off in a dash, breaking open the front door quickly with no hesitation. Lynetta had already set up the stop watch, and after only 2 minutes, Seth had already got one of the dummies down the fire escape. He got the second one down in 5 and the last one went down after 8 minutes!

Once the last dummy was secured, there was a loud, shattering noise as Seth plunged himself out of
the window of the third floor, launching himself in the open air with a rope he found. Lynetta pressed the stop button once Seth stumbled against the ground with a huff.

"Lynetta?" Walt asked.

"9 minutes and 32 seconds," she answered. Seth had completed the exam in less than 10 minutes, completely exceeding their expectations. Was the exam too easy?

Seth walked towards them heavily. His clothes scorched in some areas, and there was smoke all over his hair and face. Some parts of his hair were charred.

"Congratulations, Hunter," Walt began. "You passed the-!"

"Save it!" Seth spat angrily. Walt didn't respond, his eyes narrowing in concern. Then, he shot her a vehement glare. Lynetta inwardly flinched. "Why do you look so surprised? Did you guys think I couldn't do it? Well, guess what?! I just did!"

Lynetta swallowed. This was definitely not turning out well. She just knew something bad would occur from this.

"What were you guys expecting?" Seth demanded, throwing his arms up in anger. "Did you expect me to freeze up? Maybe go into some mental breakdown? Quit?" He gave a humorless laugh. "I may be weak, but I'm not that pathetic!"

She started, "we weren't expecting that…"

"Then what were you expecting?!" Seth screeched. "What were you expecting me to do…after forcing me to go through this nightmare again? Just because I can tolerate all the previous shit you've thrown at me, it does not mean I have no boundaries!"

"Don't blame this on Lynetta," Walt said calmly. Despite his cold front, Lynetta could tell he was startled by Seth's hysterical mood. "I created this exam. It was made in order to help you move on."

Seth drew a blank. "What?"

"I was told that your way of thinking is rather troubling," Walt explained. "We believe that your current mindset is caused by your past trauma, and if you happen to emerge victorious from this, you won't be hindered by your past, and your outlook won't be the reason for your lack of confidence."

Seth stared at him in disbelief. He placed a hand on his forehead, as if trying to calm down, and then he shot her a look of betrayal. Lynetta felt like her throat was sucked dry.

"Y-you told him?" he whispered. She hesitated.

"Not everything," she phrased carefully. "But what I told him was…for your own benefit," she finally said, though Lynetta suddenly realized too late how selfish that sounded.

"I'm very sure I can determine that on my own," he said coldly. "I thought you understood where I was getting at. Do you really find my ideals that odd and disturbing?"

She didn't answer. Seth gave a scoff at her silence.

"You do," he said, astonished as he turned to each of them. "You both do."

She didn't say anything, and Walt wisely chose to remain silent.
"You both think that you know everything there is about me," Seth continued. "Well, you are both wrong, DEAD WRONG!" he shouted. "You want to know the real reason why I am so 'disturbing' huh? Do you want to know why I push myself so hard? It's not because of my past! Far from it!"

He turned towards Walt angrily. "You believe that I'm not focusing on the present, when the present and the future have always been on my mind! I told you since the beginning my reason for accepting your training! Have you both forgotten? I came here so I have a better chance at survival! Why? It's not because I'm burdened by my past! It's because I have a goddamn prophecy hanging over my head that's what! I don't even know if I'll live past 17!"

"Seth-" she got cut off as Seth glared at her once more.

"My ideals are the ones keeping me alive!" Seth spat. "If you don't accept them, fine! But don't you dare force me to change them and accept yours just because you find them unsuitable to your taste! And then you pull this atrocity!" He furiously pointed a finger at the burning house. "You even dare mock my family's memory by turning their demise into a game!"

Oh my gods, what have they done? Lynetta thought. She was completely stunned. How could they be so tactless? This was all her fault. She planted the idea into Walt's mind, and now she's pulled him into doing something he shouldn't have and would not have done if it weren't for her. Even after all these years…she still hasn't improved.

"To think I even respected you both," Seth muttered. He shook his head. "That's it. I'm done. I don't ever want to deal with you two again. If this is the way you treated your past pupils, it's no wonder so many of them gave up or failed."

He pushed his way past her angrily, his face red despite the smoke apparent. Lynetta felt like she had to do something. She would never live this down if one of their best students quit because of her mistake.

"Wait, Seth," she started. Seth shot her a menacing look. "Please don't hold this against Mr. Forger. You are right. We were wrong in using this against you, but it was I who gave him the idea in the first place. He would never have done such an exercise if I hadn't told him what we'd talked about…"

"Lynetta…" Walt started, about to protest.

"It is my fault," she told them, "and for that, I am truly sorry."

"The damage is already done," Seth pointed out. "If you're trying to change my mind…"

"Just give us a chance to explain," Lynetta insisted. "If you are still not convinced of our sincerity, then you can go if you like. I'll even drive you to New York. Please."

Seth grew quiet, pondering over her words. After a few minutes of silence, Seth gave a nod.

"Fine, I'll give you both a chance to explain yourselves." Seth replied. "I at least owe you guys that for all the training I've gain so far. But if it's not good enough, I'll be packing my bags and going back to Camp Half-Blood ASAP!"

-o-

I couldn't believe they would do such a thing!

I sat there fuming throughout the entire car ride. Lynetta and Walt didn't bother to say anything, and I was still too pissed off to break the eerie silence. I haven't gotten this angry since Artemis decided to
deceive me over two years ago. I already doubted Walt's sanity ever since he sent me unarmed in the middle of Boston, and like that wasn't crazy enough, he pulled this one over me!

Still, some part of me understood why they chose to do it, but they could have done it differently. If they had decided to maybe talk to me about it instead going to such lengths...I wouldn't have gone into such a rage. Not only did they disrespect my late family, but they pretended to understand me just because they got some of my background info.

I scoffed. I wasn't an open book, not anymore at least.

Speaking of info, I knew almost next to nothing about Walt and Lynetta. I knew that Walt was a Roman demigod who was in isolation for unknown reasons, and then there's Lynetta, who hasn't seen Camp Half-Blood for a decade. It wasn't fair how they knew so much about me, yet I didn't know anything personal about them. It also didn't help that they both happened to have expert poker faces.

I wished I had Artemis' mind-reading ability, but I guessed that skill was for gods only.

We eventually arrived at the Tudor house. Once the car was parked underground and we'd gone up the elevator shaft, Lynetta decided that we discussed this in her room on the first floor. I was given time to change and clean up. I took a quick shower and got the soot and ash out of my hair. When I looked at the mirror, I noticed how my fringe was now uneven, and I grabbed a pair of scissors to give myself a quick hair cut. My hair was still partially wet when I finally went downstairs.

I've never been in Lynetta's room before since she didn't permit me. She never explained why, so I had this vivid imagination of seeing guns and knives lined up against the walls. Maybe she even had a stash of dangerous weapons in the closet? When she finally opened the door, the first things I noticed were the photographs.

They were everywhere: spread out on every wall and table. Lynetta's bed even had stacks of photo albums, and I noticed at least three different cameras. I never knew Lynetta liked photography.

"This is my room," she said with a bit of difficulty. "You may take a seat, Seth."

I nodded slowly, glancing at some of the photos more studiously once I sat down on a stool. I realized that many of the photos were taken at Camp Half-Blood. Lynetta was younger here, around 12 years old by the looks of it. There were pictures of her standing with her friends and siblings. There were even some with Chiron and Mr. D, when he wasn't looking that is.

I moved on, and I noticed how the images laid out a whole life story. In these latter ones, Lynetta was older. She was standing next to this tall, handsome guy with dark brown hair and a nice smile. He had a sword tied around his waist, and his arm was wrapped around her waist tightly. He appeared in most of the photos. I also noticed how Lynetta was always smiling, like actually smiling— with her teeth revealed and all— whenever she was with this guy.

"That's Matthew," Lynetta said quietly when she noticed where I was staring. "Matthew Walker. He was my boyfriend."

"How did you guys meet?" I asked. I noticed how she spoke of him in the past tense, but I decided not to bring that up.

"Here, actually," she said. "It was during the middle of my training when Matt dropped by. He was a son of Hermes, very quick-witted and charming." she said, smiling a little. "A hard worker too. We had a lot in common so we became best friends easily. It was during our later years here that he
"asked me out, and I agreed."

"I see," I said slowly, wondering what she was going with this. "Did something happen to him?"

She nodded. "He's...not here anymore. We um, we were given this mission in Louisiana. Things...didn't go as planned. We were supposed to destroy this monster hideout, and we planted these Greek bombs that were set to give us both enough time to escape. Matt and I were delayed, and because of that...I was the only one that managed to get out alive."

"I'm sorry," I said, only because it seemed right. So that's why she had so many photos of him- she was still in mourning. "But Lynetta, why are we in here? We could have gone to my room to discuss instead."

She lowered her gaze, sighing. "I wanted to appear sincere, and what better way to do that then let you come in here? This room is my life, Seth. These photos are the embodiment of my memories here and at Camp Half-Blood. Even if I stored them away like in those photo albums...it wouldn't feel the same. What I'm trying to say...is that I'm still living in the past, Seth. Even after all these years, I still haven't moved on. So when you asked me the other day why I haven't left this place..."

"This is why," I finished. Lynetta nodded, her eyes looked a bit watery. "So when Walt thought I was still burdened with my past..."

"I was the one who gave him that impression, which is why he decided to reenact your past horror." she answered stiffly. "I thought that you were like me, and my horrible judgment is what caused your ire. My narrow-mindedness is my fatal flaw, Seth. Unless I've experienced what others have gone through, I won't be able to comprehend it. It's partly the reason why I decided to become Mr. Forger's assistant in the beginning. My job allows me to live vicariously through the students. It's...Mr. Forger's way of helping me overcome my fatal flaw."

"But I thought you were done with his training," I questioned. Lynetta shook her head.

"I may have passed the physical part in less than a year, but my fatal flaw training is an on-going process. My misunderstandings cause me to make quick, irrational verdicts, just like what happened this morning."

I didn't say anything, still trying to comprehend what Lynetta told me. After hearing her personal story, I felt like I could finally see Lynetta more as a human being, and not just the stoic trainer I saw every day.

"Again, I want to apologize," she told me earnestly. "Not just for that exam, but for belittling your ideals. It's still very hard for me to accept other views that aren't my own, and you reminded me just how lacking I am in that area. It doesn't help that my mother is Athena either, since we have a reputation of being very stubborn in debates and practically everything else."

"I can't say that's not true," I muttered, reminded of how Annabeth would more or less shove her game plans on me even when I protested.

Lynetta smiled briefly. "So that is my 'excuse'. But it is all I can give you since it is the truth."

"I know," I said. I was unconsciously listening to her steady heartbeat this whole time. She wasn't lying at all. "I can tell that you are sorry, and honesty is a trait I highly value. For that, I will forgive you for your rash actions. However...why is Walt not here? No matter how much you say it is your fault, Walt also played a role in orchestrating this fiasco."

"I asked him to give us some space," she admitted. "I think that's why he's going to talk to you later
rather than now. It's still hard for me share this in front of one person, much less two- even if Mr. Forger already knows about this. So does this mean you will stay?"

I sighed. "Honestly? I think I said those words out of anger. You're not the only one struggling with a fatal flaw: Emotion is something that I need to work on still. You should know by now that I'm not one to do things halfheartedly. Completing Walt's training is also one of my goals, and I intend to achieve it."

She gave a genuine smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

-0-

"I see you sorted things out with my assistant?" Walt asked. We were now in his work room. Walt and I were sitting down facing each other. There was a table to act as a barrier between us.

I nodded. "Yes, but I'm still waiting for your apology, sir. You still played a major role in this. No matter how much Lynetta influenced you, you did come up with the idea."

"That I have," Walt admitted. "I'll start by telling you this: you remind me a lot of one of my previous students. From what Lynetta told me, your ideals and his are almost the same."

I narrowed my eyes curiously. "How so?"

"Like you, he also lost everything he had due to an unfortunate event," Walt said. "He shared some of your cynical views, and he made it his life's mission to be the very best at everything he does. Just like you in a way. In the end, he realized too late that he never actually achieved anything."

"What do you mean?"

"He strived for something that was out of his reach: perfection. You can say that was his flaw. He wanted to be perfect so his godly parent would be proud of him. Alas, you and I both know that perfection does not exist. He spent his whole life chasing after something he couldn't ever have or hope to obtain, making his life meaningless in the long run."

"Is he…still around?" I said hesitantly. Walt shook his head.

"He's dead," Walt said, his tone betraying the sorrow he felt. "The point, Hunter, is that I do not want you to end up going down that path. You have no idea how many similarities I see between you and him. You may not strive for perfection, but you are aiming for something that is just as impossible. If the impossible is what motivates you, fine! I don't have anything to say against that. But remember to also enjoy the life you have now. When you eventually finish my training, make sure to spend time with your little Greek friends, play video games, something fun. Don't just train all day long and shut everyone out. Believe me, you will end up regretting it, and that's what I'm trying to help you prevent, Hunter."

"Is this why you ordered me to do all those things?" I wondered. Walt looked confused. "You know, the video games, piano lessons, cooking, and even the chores? You wanted me to live my life?"

"Partially," Walt answered. "Those chores though, I couldn't believe how poorly you did them during the first few weeks! I don't even want to imagine how much of a slob you were before meeting me."

"Hey," I said. "If you think I'm a slob, you should meet my friends. No offense sir, but I think you're way too OCD."
"Blame my Roman gene," Walt muttered. "It's our way to abide by order and simplicity. It's how I'm brought up. If you Greeks want to be lazy bums, go right ahead. But while you are under my roof—you follow my rules, no exceptions."

I only rolled my eyes.

"Anyway, I do apologize for my miscalculation," Walt said. "If I had figured out how your past isn't your barrier, I would not have thought up such a test and have it spectacularly blow up in my face. It's also my fault for linking you with my previous student, which is why I was apprehensive about your ideals. I understand the significance of honoring dead relatives, so you have my sincerest apologies. I do not mean any disrespect towards your family."

"Apology…accepted," I said calmly. Again, I could tell Walt was being honest, and that made it easier for me to forgive him.

Walt nodded, his face not revealing anything. But from what I could hear, his heartbeat had slowed down to a normal beat. It sounded like he's actually relieved. That's nice.

"There's something else I want to discuss more in depth with you, Hunter," Walt told me seriously. "You can choose to tell, or you may not. I won't be offended."

"What is it…sir?"

"You mentioned your prophecy," he specified. I felt my heart sink. "Have you given any thought about what each of the lines mean?"

"Sort of," I said. "Since the prophecy is about my whole life, some parts have already been revealed."

"Could you tell me what those lines are?" Walt inquired. "The ones that have already been fulfilled."

I hesitated, thinking. It's not like he's asking for the whole thing, and it's already revealed anyway. There's probably no harm in telling him.

"I think it went like this: On winter's day, the Huntress' Heir shall appear."

"And endure a life of deception and fear."

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I began. "I was born on the winter's solstice as Artemis' heir. The second line 'And endure a life of deception and fear' is about my conflict with Artemis over the truth of my family's demise. Those are the lines that have happened already."

Walt appeared thoughtful, "I see, and do you have any idea where your prophecy goes next?"

"The war," I whispered. "The rest of the prophecy occurs during the war. I'm sure of it."

"When is this war going to happen?"

"Next August," I answered. Walt was taken aback.

"That's very soon," he said. "It has gotten that bad. Are you sure about this?"

I nodded. "The Great Prophecy predicts that it will occur around my friend's 16th Birthday. His birthday is in August. So I have a little more than a year. This is why I train so hard, sir. I want to be fully prepared before it happens."

"Do you believe your side can win?"

"I don't know," I said. "Right now, it can go either way. We have the gods' help and since last year,
they've already started on war preparations. But then on the other side, the Titans are rising in numbers, minor gods and demigods are defecting to Luke- he's the traitor leading the defected demigods- to his side. Plus, they have a whole army of monsters that can regenerate."

"That doesn't seem balanced to me," Walt commented. "It appears the Titan army has the advantage in numbers and resources."

"It sure seems like it," I said, shrugging. "Either way, even if we are outmatched, we still got to fight. We can't just let the Titans take over."

"So does your prophecy tell you what your role will be?"

"I think it does."

"You think?"

"It doesn't say explicitly," I told him. "It's the next line that's been bothering me. It states that I will 'walk between the shadows and light'. Does that mean I will be a neutral party? Shadows probably mean the Titans, and the light means the gods."

"That's one way to put it," Walt replied, "but tell me Hunter- Are you a neutral party? Will you remain neutral in this war?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I will fight, and it will be for Camp Half-Blood."

"Then there's your answer," Walt said. "That definition is not the right one. Perhaps the symbols represent something else? Light could easily signify Lord Apollo, and for Shadows, it could mean Lord Pluto or even Lord Thanatos. Or maybe light and shadows could mean life and death."

"But that wouldn't make any sense!" I replied. "Walking between life and death…Lord Apollo and Lord Hades. No, I don't think that's it."

"Just exploring your options," Walt said. "Prophecies are tricky things, but if there's one thing I learned about prophecies…it is that all the lines are connected. Think Hunter: you know that you will fight for the gods. Your prophecy already preordained your relation and conflict with Artemis. Why would the Fates choose a child of Artemis, and a male one at that? Does Lady Artemis' deception bear any significant meaning? How would you connect all those together?"

"I-I don't know!" I exclaimed. "I don't know how all those things are supposed to connect!"

"Then you better start thinking long and hard about it, Hunter," Walt warned. "You have only a year, maybe sooner before the war officially begins. It is only until you know what role to play, then you can use my training to prepare yourself."

I nodded slowly. "Yes, sir."

"Call me Walt, Hunter," he told me. I blinked in surprise. He did mention in the beginning how I could address him by name when I reached a certain point in my training. That meant I was making good progress in his eyes.

"Okay, Walt."

-o-

As much as I hate to admit it, Walt did have a point.
I had to figure out what that third line meant, yet I felt like I was getting nowhere on that. What reason could there be for my birth? Why was Artemis chosen to be the parent? Why was the deception justified? I struggled to think up an answer for the next few days. I thought so hard on it that even my insomnia was making a comeback, just when I was starting to look 'normal'.

Of course, the Fates apparently didn't like leaving me in the dark for too long. I found my answer eventually...

…In the form of an Assassin's Creed game.

It's funny what video games could do.

I was nearing the end of Conner's (and Desmond's) journey. Everything was in chaos at the end. Juno turned out evil (no surprise there), the MC actually got off out, and it turned out that one of his friends was a Templar spy, and she got killed off too.

"That's what she gets for spying," I muttered absentmindedly, closing the TV. A moment later, my mind made sense of the revelation.

Spying…oh gods, I was suppose to-!

Suddenly, I was screaming curses at the Fates, the gods, everything. Even the video game didn't escape my wrath. In my anger, I slammed the game controller I was holding towards the wall with such force, it shattered into pieces upon impact. I wrenched my hands in my hair tightly, my eyes wide.

There's got to be another alternative! There has to be! Any alternative would be better than this!

Despite my mental pleas, I knew that there wasn't any. I didn't spend the last few days thinking up meanings for nothing. This was the first one that actually made sense. Was this why the Fates had Artemis deceive me? Why I was born male? It was all so I would have the perfect *alibi*.

Eventually, my chaos attracted some attention. Lynetta came in to see what was wrong. Her face grew pale at the sight of me. I didn't blame her. I probably resembled a madman with anger management problems. I was now on the ground, my arms wrapped around my knees, my mouth still mumbling 'No' repetitively.

"Seth…" she started. "What happened?"

I didn't answer. I felt my body trembling with dread. When I said that I wanted to help out in the war, I wanted to fight with my friends beside me. *Not like this!* I heard Lynetta knelt down beside me, placing a tentative hand on my shoulder.

"Seth?"

My voice sounded raspy when I spoke, "I…I finally figured it out. I found the connection. It all makes sense now…"

"What makes sense?" she asked.

"My role. I finally know what role I am going to play."

-o-
Lynetta was the one who cleaned up the mess.

I eventually found the strength to stand, and I stood there silently, my face blank and nearly void of any feeling. I wondered if I was still in denial. Lynetta scrapped up the broken pieces, her attention focused only on the ground. She eventually took the pieces she swept up outside, leaving me alone briefly.

I took that moment to think it through more thoroughly. My initial shock and anger at the realization had finally died out, and my mind could finally function normally again. I could still be wrong. It wasn't like that was the last line of the prophecy. Maybe...just maybe, the other parts would contradict my reasoning? There's at least some hope that it wouldn't come to that.

Lynetta came back in, regarding me carefully.

"Do you need anything?" she said. I shook my head.

"No, I don't. I just...let my anger get the best of me. Sorry about the game controller," I apologized.

Lynetta nodded. "Do you want to see Mr. Forger? I'm guessing that...this is between you and him. Right?"

I paused before nodding silently. Lynetta beckoned me to follow her, and I complied.

Somehow, I'd come to a decision to just tell Walt my whole prophecy. It wasn't like he could pass on the info to anyone else, and the gods already knew about it. As for Lynetta, she was in the same criteria as Walt- there was no one else here that they could gossip this too. I was glad that this place was in such isolation.

Eventually, we reached Walt's room, and I finally uttered out my discovery.

Walt didn't say anything at first, and Lynetta, who was standing by the door, was pacing about in short strides, finally understanding my previous burst of anger.

"This...changes things," Walt replied quietly. "Hunter, are you sure that is all there is?"

I nodded slowly. "I wouldn't have asked for you if I wasn't, and I really need Lynetta's and your input."

I told them my prophecy...all of it.

As much as I wished to do this alone, there were just some things that I couldn't do without the aid of another. This was considered one of those times.

"So what do you think?" I asked them both. "Am I right? Am I supposed to act as some spy?"

Walt sighed, rubbing his temple, as if to clear up his head. "It's hard to say at this point. You could be right."

"Could?"

He nodded. "Yes, but I don't think that is all you are required to do."
"What do you mean?"

"Spying and infiltration. I can see that as being part of your job description," Walt replied, "but like you said, that line isn't your last. You also got to consider the fourth line: Only to bring the world under Death's flight. How would you go from being a spy in the Titan Army, to someone capable of achieving that?"

"I don't know." I said, frustrated at my cluelessness.

"How about we discuss the fourth line first?" Lynetta suggested. "Once we reach a meaning that we can all agree on, then we will try to connect the two together."

"Death's flight might have something to do with Lord Hades' realm." I said. "But why would I want to bring the world under it?"

Walt placed a hand under his chin. "If we're going to go with that, my best bet would be Lord Thanatos, the god of death himself. In the myths, he is also described as having wings. So that would explain the 'flight'."

"So that means I have an appointment with Lord Thanatos in the future," I muttered, shivering slightly. Who wouldn't be scared of meeting a death god? I barely lasted going through Lord Hades' place the first time. I didn't want to go back!

"That's a symbolic definition," Lynetta said, "I was thinking the line could be more literal: you could be one that signifies 'death'."

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"If my hypothesis is correct, I think this line is what defines your role more clearly," she answered. "Your job as a spy may involve a lot of death- so much that you would 'bring the world under it.' Or, it could be another task in which you cause the deaths."

"Lynetta...you're suggesting that I will become a spy and a killer."

" Depends on whose deaths you cause," Lynetta pointed out. "We've all killed monsters. Does that make us killers?"

"That's different," I said. "We kill monsters only so they don't kill us. It's our way to survive."

"The same reasons apply to this situation," Lynetta said. "War isn't a game. Murder is justified, betrayal is common. You could even say it is worse than hell since war punishes both good and evil. Each side uses whatever means they must in order to win and defeat the enemy. Will you kill for the sake of peace?"

I hesitated. "If my life or those I care about are endangered, then yes, I will kill without hesitation."

"Even if the enemy was once your friend?" Walt said narrowly.

"I...I can't say," I murmured. "It depends on the situation."

Walt only gave a comprehending gaze. "That's something you are likely to encounter, Hunter, if you do end up working as a spy in secret. Tell me, what is the number one most important thing you must uphold? What have I been teaching you?"

"Mission always comes first," I answered instantly.
"Exactly," Walt said, sounding slightly pleased. "Now answer me this: if you must choose between the life of an enemy and the success of a mission, which one will you pick?"

"The mission," I replied.

"What about a friend?"

I hesitated. "Depends on the mission."

"A mission to save humankind," Walt specified. "Cliché, but it's too true in our world these days. Which one will you pick?"

"If it's that important..." I started slowly. "Then I will choose the mission."

"One final question," Walt stated. "Would you choose to save your own life or complete that fore-mentioned task?"

There was a lapse of silence as I let the question sink in fully.

"You want me to say 'the mission' right?" I said quietly, not meeting his eyes. "Even though I know that is the right thing... I don't know what I will do. I may end up being selfish by choosing my life over thousands of people I'm not familiar with."

"I know it's not easy," Walt said, "I don't know the answer to that question either. I don't know what I might do in those circumstances."

"Then why did you ask?"

"I was checking to see how honest you are," Walt said. "It's human nature to value your own life. If you had told me that you would choose the mission over your life, I would not believe it."

"So you were testing me," I said matter of fact.

"Treat it as a way of knowing you better," Lynetta finally spoke up. "Despite what you may think, there is still a lot that we don't know about you, Seth. If we are to help you reach your full potential, there are boundaries we must overcome to get there. Getting to know you as a person is one of those steps."

I nodded. "Alright, but to get straight to the point: will I become a spy for Camp Half-Blood?"

Lynetta paused briefly, thinking. "I don't think we can determine that for you, Seth. The prophecy is about you. Our suggestions and input may help you understand it better, but ultimately, it is your choices that create the prophecy, which means what you come up with is more likely to be correct."

"I'll have to agree with her on this, Hunter," Walt said. I tried not to let my disappointment show. I had been hoping Walt would give me some better alternatives, yet I've gotten ones that were even worse.

"Then, my assumptions were right after all," I murmured. I felt my chest tighten with anxiety.

I was not ready for this. I didn't think I'd ever be ready. Being a spy was dangerous, and from what I'd gathered from Walt and Lynetta, I doubted being a double agent was all I was supposed to do. There was still more, something involved with a lot of death. As to what that something was, the answer was still shrouded. What's worse was that I couldn't avoid it. Prophecies were definite. I've experienced and heard that line from Apollo too often to doubt it now.
I rather dealt with Lord Thanatos than this any day. At least I wouldn't be directly responsible for this *Death's Flight* thing.

"So now that we've established your next step, I'll have to up the pace of your training," Walt said. "Lynetta, you mentioned how Hunter is nearly done with the theory work?"

"He is," she answered. "I'm thinking we should start with the practical today. Would you like that Seth?"

"Yeah, definitely," I answered, my mind momentarily clear from that prophecy stuff.

Lynetta gave a brief smile at my enthusiasm. "If we may, Mr. Forger?"

He nodded. "Go right ahead."

We left the room after that.

-o-

After the targets were lined up right beside each after at equal distance, I finally had my first experience in firing a gun.

It was a lot harder than it looked.

First, I couldn't handle the recoil. I ended up injuring my hands slightly because I wasn't expecting the impact to be that strong. Second problem I had was the noise. Even with the earmuffs, my sharp hearing unfortunately could pick up that piercing bang once the bullet was shot, causing me to cringe in pain. It wasn't surprising that my bullet ended up nowhere close to the center.

When I told Lynetta of these problems, she jotted them quickly on that clipboard she carried.

"I should have taken account of your sharp hearing," Lynetta said. "That was a lapse of judgment on my part. Let's see, I think we have some spare ear plugs. I think those would work better."

She was right: after putting on those ear plugs she gave me, the noise became dimmer. I could still hear clearly, but at least the sound wasn't deafening. Lynetta also helped me fix my hold on the gun so the recoil wouldn't be so violent. I made better progress after those changes. Right now, I had both hands on a gun. Once I can fully handle the recoils, Lynetta told me I can move on to using a gun in each hand.

May was soon reaching an end. Keeping the dates in mind, I asked Lynetta if I could go out on May 30th.

"It's my little sister's 10th birthday," I explained. "I don't see her a lot, but I always paid a visit on her birthday and sometimes Thanksgiving and Christmas."

"Where does your sister live?"

"New Jersey," I answered. "I won't be out for too long. It's during the late morning and afternoon."

"I don't see why not," Lynetta said. "You have been doing very well with marksmanship so far, so I have no complaints. I'll bring it up with Mr. Forger later tonight."

When Walt gave the thumbs up, I excitedly got ready immediately. On the day of, I wanted to trade in the drachmas I had in my bag for mortal dollars, but Walt just handed me cash without the exchange. When I protested, he only rolled his eyes.
"Just take it," Walt said. "I have too much that I can't use up anyway. Save me the trouble."

"Okay," I muttered, pocketing the cash. "Thanks."

He nodded before turning his back towards the worktable. "Tell your sister I said 'Happy Birthday.'"

"I will," I said, a little startled by Walt's display of kindness? He even sounded a bit odd.

I left the room and put on a light jacket over my T-shirt. New Jersey could still be very breezy this time of year. I strapped on my converses, and placed my communication device in my jeans pocket securely before meeting Lynetta at the driveway. She had volunteered to drive me, saying how she wanted to go sightseeing and shopping while there. I only rolled my eyes at her comment. It must be a girl thing.

While on the road, I asked Lynetta for some advice.

"A present?" she repeated after hearing my question.

"Yeah, I was wondering if you know of any good 'girl presents'," I asked. "I don't know what a ten year old girl would like."

"Hmm, do you know what Lucy likes to do?"

"I think so."

"Start with that," she suggested. "We could drop by an outlet first. When you find something, we could head to your sister's residence."

"Alright," I agreed.

After window shopping for who knew how long, my silver eyes finally spotted something suitable.

It was a deluxe hair accessory set. It had different combs, shampoos, and curlers, along with different colored ribbons. It was even on sale!

"That one," I said instantly, pointing at it. "That's the one Lucy would like." I remembered how Lucy always loved to do things with her hair, and that hobby hadn't change last I saw her. I was sure she'd love it.

We paid for the hair set, and I also chose a pretty purple bag and birthday card from another store. I also noticed a bakery store and quickly purchased some pastries that Lucy liked. Eventually, we left and once we crossed into Westwood, New Jersey, Lynetta dropped me off of the family house as promised. Making sure that my gift and bag of pastries are in good shape, I rang the doorbell.

The first time I came here, I made sure that the couple adopting Lucy was suitable. I heard too many horror stories of poor foster care in the news, so I couldn't help but be critical. Evan and Susan Morrison soon put my uneasiness to rest however. They were a relatively young couple who have been trying to have a child but failed. When they heard that Lucy was in need of a family nearly two years ago, they agreed to adopt her. They were polite and kind individuals, and I found myself warming up to them even more with each visit.

When the door finally opened, Mrs. Morrison was at the door. I also heard excited barking noises from Pebbles the Poodle, the dog Lucy got last year.

"Hello Seth," Mrs. Morrison greeted. "I'm glad you can drop by."
"It's a pleasure. Thank you for having me," I said. I made my way inside and handed her the pastry bag. "For your family."

"Oh! Are those from Howard's Bakery?" I nodded. "Lucy loves those!"

Pebbles bounded up to me, barking loudly all the way. Mrs. Morrison sighed.

"Pebbles! No barking at guests!" she scolded the poodle. However, Pebbles continued to bark even louder, aggravating her.

Noticing this, I placed the gift bag on the floor as I knelt down, and staring straight at Pebble's eyes, I demanded, "Pebbles! Sit down and be quiet!"

Immediately, Pebbles sat down and closed its mouth with a snap.

"Good boy," I said, smiling. I urged the dog to come forward and Pebbles was soon snuggling against me in my arms. I ran my hand through its white scruff as Mrs. Morrison stared at me, her mouth agape. I gave a sheepish smile.

"I have a beagle," I told her. "I'm pretty good with dogs. It's all about the eye contact you know?"

"Yes…" she said, slightly suspicious.

I was spared from the incoming interrogation when her husband came to greet me.

"Hello Seth, no trouble on the road I hope?"

"No sir," I said, setting the dog back down. "I thought you were going to work…?"

"And miss my daughter's big day?" Mr. Morrison said. "I called off. You're the first to arrive, Seth. Lucy's friends will probably arrive soon though."

"Where is she?" I replied. Just when I asked, my sharp hearing picked up rapid footsteps going downstairs. Lucy appeared on the other clearing.

"Seth?" she exclaimed. "You came!"

I knelt down as she ran towards me, her arms circling around my neck as she hugged me tightly. I placed a hand around her protectively, taking in her warmth.

"Of course I came," I said. "How could I ever miss your birthday?" She let go of me as I handed her my gift. "Happy 10th birthday Lucy. An acquaintance of mine also wishes you a Happy Birthday."

She nodded, and her face lit up as she took in the pretty lavender wrapping, her favorite color. I smiled briefly at her excitement. She looked so pretty with those purple ribbons in her dirty blonde hair.

She took it from me, curious. "Thank you so much, Seth. What's in here?"

"I'm not spoiling it," I told her. I gave a laugh when I saw her pout. "Be patient, Lucy. You can open it up once all your friends get here. Then, you can open them all at once."

"Okay," she said glumly. She wrapped her hand around mine as she led me to the dining room to drop off her gift with the others. "Come on Seth! I got a lot of stuff planned for us to do!"

"I'm sure you do," I replied.
The doorbell rang. Pebbles started his barking rant again.

"I'll get it!" Lucy called.

She gave me another quick hug before she ran to open the door, with Pebbles scrambling out of the way. I heard exclamations of 'Happy Birthday!' and a bunch of salutary greetings. Mrs. Morrison poked her head out from the kitchen corridor.

"Seth, do you mind if you get some plates out on the top of the cabinet? I can't reach them."

"Sure," I said. I opened the door and reached the plates easily. I didn't even need to stand on my toes. Did I get taller? "Here you go."

"Thank you Seth," she said, taking them from me and setting them on the table. I watched the stove, something smelled really good.

"What are you cooking?" I asked. "It smells nice."

"I'm preparing lasagna," she said, "I'm also making a salad."

"Salad?" I repeated. "Do you need help with that?"

"Oh, I don't want to trouble you," she started.

"I don't mind," I insisted. "Lucy's spending time with her friends, and I don't have anything to do so…" When Mrs. Morrison is still skeptical, I added, "besides, I know how to cook now, so you don't need to worry about me burning anything up."

"Really?" she said, surprised. I nodded.

"I'm handy with a knife too."

"Oh alright, if you insist," she gave in. "See those Romanian lettuces there? Start peeling those and wash them. I'll need you to peel and cut the cucumbers too."

"Just tell me what to do," I grinned. It's time I put those cooking skills to use.

So that's what I did. I eventually finished preparing the salad, and with Mrs. Morrison's permission, I also helped her prepare and cook the main course. Mr. Morrison eventually came in as I set the hot dish of vegetables with the rest.

"Whoa," he exclaimed seeing the table. "Did you help my wife prepare this, Seth?"

"I did, sir," I said, "but it was really nothing on my part. Your wife was the one who instructed me…"

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Morrison said. "You really are too modest, dear. You should have seen the way he cut those carrots and onions, Evan! Almost like one of those chefs we see on TV! When did you start learning how to cook again?"

"January of this year," I answered. Though, my 'expert slicing' might have originated from my dual wielding skills. I smiled uneasily.

"Exactly! Only 5 months, Evan!" Mrs. Morrison praised. I blushed at her compliment. I really got to thank Lynetta for teaching me.
"I'm glad I was able to help," I said quietly. Mr. Morrison nodded in approval.

"Way to step it up, Seth," he told me, patting me on the shoulder. "Young men these days. If I had half that cooking talent of yours, I would have won over half of the girls in my old high school!"

"Evan," his wife warned jokingly.

"If you need any tips on getting a girlfriend Seth, you come to me," Mr. Morrison told me seriously. I tried to keep on a straight face. "Girls always love a guy who can cook."

"That's very true," his wife cut in. "Unless you already have one?" I shook my head quickly.

"N-no…I'm single."

He gave a laugh, and said jokingly, "well, let me tell you Seth, enjoy it while it lasts because it won't last long for you!"

_What is that supposed to mean?_

"Ha ha," I said mirthlessly, suddenly uncomfortable of where the topic's headed. I might as well go along with it. It would take too long to explain why I was avoiding love without some fabrication. I didn't like lying when I didn't have to. "I'm going to check on Lucy. Call if you need me."

"Thank you Seth," Mrs. Morrison said as I exited the kitchen.

I eventually located Lucy and her friends in the basement. After some introductions, I sat there chatting with these 9 to 10 year old kids. Despite the age gap, I actually enjoy talking about mundane subjects with them. I'd always been good with little kids, so I guessed it wasn't too much of a surprise.

More of Lucy's friends arrived, and once everyone was here, we finally had lunch. Lucy opened up her gifts soon after, and that amazed look on her face when she saw the deluxe hair set I bought her was priceless. She hugged me so hard that I thought she was choking me.

After some activities and birthday cake, her friends started to leave. Lucy's parents insisted that I stayed for dinner, and at Lucy's added insistence, I relented. It was during the middle of dinner that Mrs. Morrison gave a shocking announcement.

"Lucy," she began. "Your father and I have something to tell you. We have another gift we haven't given to you yet."

I raised my head from my food as Lucy asked, "another gift? What is it?"

Mrs. Morrison gave a big smile. "How would you like to have a younger brother or sister, Lucy?"

I dropped my spoon in shock as Pebbles starting barking loudly. Even the dog understood the significant meaning. Or maybe Pebbles just wanted more food.

"Oh my gods," I muttered. "T-that means you're…"

"I'm pregnant!" she exclaimed happily. "Evan and I went to the doctor's office yesterday, and it is official! The baby will be due next January."

"Congratulations!" I said. "I'm happy for you both."

"Thank you!" she said. Then, she turned to Lucy, who still hadn't said anything. "So Lucy…will
you like to be an older sister?"

"I…I guess," she mumbled. She didn't sound too happy. I narrowed my eyes in concern.

"Lucy?" she noticed my stare and she gave a forced smile.

"Yeah, that's great." she said finally. "I will love to have a younger sibling."

"Good to hear!" Mr. Morrison said. "Now, we are hoping it will be a boy. Since we have Lucy already, it will be nice to have a son and daughter."

"Let's hope for the best," I said, "but if it's a girl…?"

"We'll still love her no matter what," Mr. Morrison replied. "She is ours. Besides, we can always try again."

"That's nice to hear," I said. Now, if only Artemis could be just as understanding…but I guessed that wish was too much to hope for. I noticed how Lucy turned silent again, picking at her food with reluctance.

When dinner was over, I decided to have a private talk with Lucy. She may have fooled her adoptive parents with that smile, but not me. I knew her too well, and it was a smile I used often. I recognized it immediately.

"Lucy? May I come in?" I asked outside her room. I heard an affirmative reply and stepped inside.

Her room was tidy for the most part. The table was sprawled with books and homework, and there was a stash of dirty laundry by the closet. My eyesight even picked up dust on the drawers. Dang it, I just knew Walt's OCD was contagious.

Lucy was sitting on her bed, her arms folded around her bent knees.

"Lucy…is something wrong?" I asked gently as I sat beside her. She shook her head. I heard her heartbeat pick up even quicker than usual. I frowned. "Lying isn't going to do you any good, Lucy. I thought you knew that."

"I'm not lying," she insisted. Her heartbeat went down slightly. "I really am happy that my parents are having a kid."

"A half truth," I guessed. Lucy's shoulders slumped, and her heart was now at a steady rhythm, confirming my conjecture. "Look, I'm here to help you Lucy. Okay? I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

"You promise?" she said quietly.

"I promise."

She unfolded her legs and straightened herself. I allowed her a moment to herself before she finally told me what was bothering her.

"I'm scared," she admitted. "I'm also jealous. What if mom and dad end up loving that child more than me? What if they…what if they leave me behind?"

I sighed quietly. I should have expected this.

"Lucy," I told her. "Even if you are not their blood-related child, your parents will not love you any
less.” When Lucy still didn't reply, I continued, "Just look at the way they've taken care of you for the past 2, almost three years. They've taken care of you, took you to school, and even hosted this birthday party. Would they do all that if they didn't love you as their own daughter?"

She hesitantly shook her head. "No."

"So don't worry," I reassured her. "Okay? Besides, I'm sure you will make a great older sister. Plus, you'll have someone to boss around too." She laughed.

"That would be cool." She leaned in against me, and I placed a protective arm around her shoulders. "I'm glad I have an older brother like you, Seth. I'm sure that if the others were still here, they would agree with me."

"Yeah," I mumbled. Lucy noticed my change in tone as she looked at me, almost comprehending me.

She started softly, "sometimes… I feel really bad. Maybe if I woke some of the others up, and they also got out with me…then they would still be here. Do you wonder about that too, Seth?"

"Not really," I admitted. "My mind has been occupied with other things."

"Well," she muttered. "Mom and Dad would always tell me it wasn't my fault. They told me that they would be happy that we lived. Do you think so?"

"I can't say," I said quietly. "I haven't given that much thought."

"Oh."

We sat there in silence on her bed for a while, just comforted by each other's presence. Pebbles eventually found his owner as he ran inside and settled into Lucy's lap. I petted his head absentmindedly, Pebbles licking my fingers while I did so.

Lucy's about to have a new family member, her parents were beyond excited. Yet, I couldn't help but remember what's about to happen in the same year. There would be an all out war that they were completely unaware of. If the Titans beat us, history would end up repeating itself: mortals would become subjugated, and thousands would be killed. If there was even the slightest chance that I could prevent that from happening, I would do it. If not for the gods or even Camp Half-Blood, I'd do it in order to provide Lucy and her unborn sibling a chance at a good life.

"Lucy…there's something I must do," I whispered. "Something that only I can do, and I don't know if I can."

She gave me a confused look, her eyes filled with that childlike innocence that it almost hurt to see it.

"Is it really hard?" she asked.

I chuckled slightly. "Yeah, it's really hard. It's so difficult that…that I have become afraid."

"Huh? But if it's that hard, why don't you ask your family for help?"

"I can't do that Lucy," I said, shaking my head. "I have to do this on my own."

Lucy made a face. "You mean Clare and Giselle can't know about it?"

I blinked, startled by the mentioned names and her sudden sharpness.
I sighed. "Yes."

"If it's a secret, why are you telling me?" she asked.

"I feel the need to tell someone I can trust," I told her, "and that's you, Lucy. There's no one I trust more than you."

She smiled before she narrowed her eyes in concern. "I trust you a lot too, Seth, but…wouldn't that mean you don't trust your family?"

"I forget how smart you are," I teased, reaching a hand over to ruffle her hair. Lucy cried out playfully while Pebbles started barking.

"Stop it!" she said, laughing as I aimed to tickle her sides. She buckled, soon gasping for breath.

"Let's go downstairs okay?" I told her, effectively pushing the previous topic out of the way. "I think you've sulked for long enough."

She laughed. "Okay, Seth."

-0-

It was time for me to leave.

Just like in previous times, Lucy always made me promise to show up at the holidays. I told her I would. Before I left to join Lynetta, who was standing beside her Prius at the garage way, Lucy gave me one last hug.

"I'll support you, Seth," she told me. "Even if I can't do much…I just want to let you know that. So I hope you do okay. Whatever it is you must do."

I smiled and gave her a quick peck on the forehead. "Thank you Lucy. That means a lot to me."

"But you must promise me something first."

"What is that?"

"Try to trust Giselle too," she said. I tried not to frown at that. "I can tell she cares about you a whole lot. She mentioned you a couple times when I was with her."

"Really?" I said, skeptical.

She nodded. "Just promise me okay. Please?"

"I'll try," I said finally. "Now take care of yourself okay? Your parents will need your help once your sibling arrives. I know you can be a good helper."

"Okay."

I waved goodbye and finally got in Lynetta's car, pondering silently the whole trip back.

-0-

A few days later, I decided to uphold my promise to Lucy.

After discussing this with Walt and Lynetta, who both agreed with me, I built a huge bonfire at the
front of the house. I started tossing in the food I made, hoping that the deity it was meant for would show up.

"You must need my services a whole lot to go this far," the god said once he appeared. I gave a deep bow.

"Lord Hermes," I said respectfully. "I hope my burnt offering was to your liking?"

*It's him again!* Martha hissed. *That silver-eyed boy from last time...*

**Did you remember to get me a rat?**

"Um, it slipped my mind." I said.

*Oh Styx.* George grumbled.

"Enough about that rat, George," Hermes muttered, rolling his eyes before turning to me. "How can I say 'no' to this? It's been such a long time since food offerings of this size was done."

"I'm glad," I said curtly. "You are right. I do need your help Lord Hermes. I want you to deliver a very important message to Lady Artemis and Lord Apollo. I also must request that you swear on the Styx that you won't reveal its content to anyone besides me, Walt, Lynetta, and the intended."

"Hmm, very top secret huh?" Hermes smirked. "I rarely get those. Now you've got my curiosity hyped up. Alright, I swear on the Styx. Let's hear it."

I told him.

By the time I was done, Hermes was confused. "I was under the impression that you and your mother didn't get along."

"You'll have to ask her for the specifics," I told him. "All I am permitted to say is that nothing is what it seems."

"I see," he said. "Now I get why you asked for my oath. She's not going to like what she hears."

"I know," I said, "but I rather not get into another misunderstanding. I've had my fill of those."

"Very well," Hermes said. "By tomorrow, both will hear of your message."

"Good," I said, giving another bow. "Thank you for your assistance."

The messenger god nodded. I turned away as Hermes went into his divine form and vanished in a burst of golden light.

-o-
Incarceration

This morning, I was ecstatic.

Very abnormal of me by the way, since I was usually grumpy and tired during the early parts of the day. This morning however, Lynetta decided to give me a break since she had to run an errand. So instead of morning training, I was actually in the kitchen...

…With a beautiful handmade *whip cream pie* sitting right in front of me.

In case you haven't guessed already, I absolutely *loved* whip cream. Thanks to Lynetta's tutelage, I have finally achieved my dream of crafting a whip cream pie any time I wanted. After over 30 failed attempts, I have at last made the pie to perfection. I had decided to spare this pie from the bonfire yesterday night after Hermes turned up a bit sooner than expected.

I breathed in the aroma, sighing in pure bliss as I set my pie down on the table. I had crafted the crust yesterday and let it cool down awhile before putting the right amount of whip. After a night in the fridge, the whip cream had finally settled down at the right temperature. I could literally feel saliva creeping out of the edges of my mouth as I hurried for utensils.

With a knife and fork in hand, I finally seated myself down at the empty table. Just when I was about to have my perfect moment…

Trouble came in through the door *literally*.

I felt the aura of a very pissed off goddess a moment too late as the front door was blasted off its hinges. There was a bunch of smoke and debris everywhere, and I scrambled away quickly, pie in hand, to avoid the unwelcome guest.

Walt also heard the ruckus when he stormed out of his work room. A gigantic, completely loaded bazooka tucked in his arms. He had a bazooka this whole time?!

"WHO IN PLUTO'S NAME DARES-ACHOO!" Walt sneezed. He sniffled, and grabbed a spare Kleenex on the nearby shoe case, lowering the bazooka he had in his hand. "Gods, I hate allergies!"

"Walt!" I yelled, running towards him quickly. "Please tell her to back off!"

"Who?"

"Seth Hunter!" the goddess shouted, finally showing up in front of me and Walt. Realizing who it was, Walt slowly moved the bazooka behind his back. "What is the meaning of this?! Sending me Hermes with that kind of message?!"

I took that moment to step behind Walt.

"L-lady Artemis, is something the matter?" Walt asked; swallowing heavily as Artemis turned her steely gaze towards him, as if finally noticing him there.

"Of course, Walt Forger. That's the reason why I'm here," Artemis said icily. "Now step aside so I may speak to my child directly- Unless, you fancy being a jackalope?"

"No, ma'am!" he said immediately. "I-I only wanted to welcome you properly…seeing how you decided to break down my precious sensor-automated door with no regards to…" Artemis gave him
a look. "Never mind…so Hunter…HUNTER!"

I was already running down towards the basement when I heard Walt call my name a second time, with the pie still in my hands. Just as I made my way towards the garage, there was a burst of light as Artemis teleported in front of me, looking very annoyed.

"Seth…" she breathed. I raised a hand up.

"Look, I can explain," I started. Oh man, that whip cream pie smelled so good. Why did Artemis have to choose this time to show up?

"Then why did you run from me?" she pointed out. "You must know by now that I'll always find you no matter what."

Oh dang. That sounded like something a stalker would say.

"You can hardly blame me for running after seeing you charge in like that," I reasoned. "Walt really liked that door you know. Nearly gave all of us a heart attack with that entrance."

Artemis straightened herself and gave a huff. "I'll be sure to compensate for the damages, but did you honestly think I wouldn't do a thing after hearing your outrageous plans from Hermes? Why did you not tell me this? It would have spared me the explanation."

I gulped. "Technically, after seeing you act like this, I'm very glad I asked Lord Hermes to send you the message instead of me. H-how is he by the way?"

"Gone to recover," Artemis said briskly, "but we are off topic-"

"Gone to recover?! What did you do to him?"

"It doesn't matter," Artemis hissed. I took a step back as she approached. "Seth, I forbid you to ever set those plans in motion! You are never to approach the Titan army- not if I can help it! Do you understand?"

"Lady Artemis, you know I can't do that!" I protested. "My prophecy-!"

"Then you leave me with no choice!" she lunged for me as I dodged, and before I could get very far, Artemis grabbed the crook of my right arm with such force that I thought she was going to wrench it off. So, I did the only possible and stupidest thing I could have done.

I chucked my perfectly innocent pie at her face.

Let me tell you…I have never seen Artemis so pissed off before in my life. She spat out the whip cream in her mouth and lifted a hand to wipe her whip cream covered face, her silver eyes menacing. She stared at me, mentally saying: Really?

This led me into doing the second stupidest thing I could have done: I ran…again.

But hey, desperate times call for desperate measures.

I didn't spare a second look as I ran as fast I could, even managing to reach the foot of the stairs before I felt Artemis tackle me to the ground with a loud thud! She pulled me up by the collar of my shirt before teleporting both of us. I screamed for Walt, but it was to no avail. Before I knew it, Walt's basement disappeared from my eyes, and we were now in the middle of the Hunters' camp site.
"Lady Artemis, you're finally- SETH?!" I heard Thalia say in surprise.

I didn't get the chance to reply as Artemis dragged me beside her with a hand clasped over the back of my neck. She rolled out a makeshift tent and quite roughly, tossed me into it. I stumbled and turned to see Artemis snapping her fingers, causing the opening of the tent to zip up tight. I got up instantly, trying to pry the tent open, but it stubbornly remained closed.

"Let me out!" I yelled. "You can't do this to me! Artemis-!"

"I can do what I like!" I heard Artemis say. "Until you agree to my demands, you will be confined in that tent with absolutely no means of escape!"

"You think I chose to go against you?" I shouted, pounding my fists against the tent. "I have no choice! You're going against a prophecy, Lady Artemis! Just let me out so we can discuss this!"

"There's nothing more to discuss," Artemis retorted. "You are my child, Seth. I will not see my own flesh and blood plunge himself into such danger where I cannot supervise you! Only until you swear to me on the Styx that you will give up such notions, then I will free you."

"What?" I shouted. That's it, time for Plan B. "Thalia! Eliza! Heck, any of you! Please tell your Lady to let me out! She's going against a prophecy! By keeping me here, she's risking danger upon herself!"

Apollo's lessons on the dangers of prophecies were so paying off.

"My Lady," I heard Thalia whisper, "what prophecy is he talking about?"

"It's nothing to be concerned about, Thalia," Artemis said dismissively. "It seems Seth has inherited my brother's dramatics. Now make sure that you post a hunter in front of his tent from now on."

"I…yes, my Lady," she said at last, much to my dismay. "By the way, what is that white stuff you have on you?"

Artemis paused before replying, her voice strained. "This mortal substance called 'Whip cream'."

"How did you…”

"Thalia please," I pleaded.

"I'm sorry Seth," she said, "as Lieutenant- I have to follow her orders."

I clenched my teeth. If I'd known this was how Artemis would react, I would never have told her in the first place! I should have just carried out my plans securely and then send Hermes! Damn it.

"You're not making this easier for anyone!" I shouted. "I won't ever change my mind! You hear me?!"

Artemis didn't reply. Instead, she ignored my outburst and I heard her assign one of the hunters I didn't know well to act as my temporary guard.

I gritted my teeth in frustration. I reached for my daggers, only to realize that I didn't have them on me. I left my daggers and my archery weapons back at Walt's house! Lynetta wouldn't be coming back until later today, and Walt had no idea where I was. I didn't even know which state I was in.

Instead of the daggers I was hoping for, my hand found the communication device tucked in my back pocket. I felt a rush of anticipation as I eagerly pushed the right buttons, and after calling Walt's
name more times I could count, I eventually heard the familiar, irritated voice on the other end:

*Quit yelling so much!* Walt replied back.

"Sorry," I said. "Look, could you somehow lock in on my location?"

*I'm trying to as we speak, Hunter,* Walt said. *But it's taking longer than usual. The signal there is awful! You might have to wait a couple days…*

"*A couple days?!*" I exclaimed. "Can you not go any faster? Artemis has abducted me Walt! She kidnapped me and locked me up!"

I heard Walt give a scoff.

*Very impatient, aren't you? Too bad for you, this is the fastest I can go. You might have to wait even longer for me to get Lord Apollo's attention.*

"Lord Apollo?"

*I ain't wasting my and Lynetta's time to get you,* he told me. *Since it's taking so long, you must be very far away from Massachusetts Hunter. Even if we came to get you ourselves, Lady Artemis isn't going to listen to our demands unless it's someone of her position.*

"I get it," I said, taking that moment to calm down. "Wait, couldn't I just pray to Apollo to come get me? That would be faster wouldn't it?"

*Hunter, you are right now in Artemis' sphere of influence,* Walt deadpanned. *Unless she allows it, no gods are allowed to see or hear anything from the outside unless they happen to be nearby. Apollo wouldn't be able to hear your calls.*

"I didn't know that," I replied quietly, filing that info to memory. There went my chance of calling Nemesis for help too. "Then what about you? How am I still able to reach you?"

*I wonder about that…*he muttered. *I did program it to bypass a lot of security networks, but my guess is that Lady Artemis is the one allowing it.*

"Why would she do that?" I asked.

*How do I know? Maybe she finds it amusing? She could be listening in right now…*

And just at that instant, my communication with Walt was cut off. I cursed, slamming the device onto the nearby bed before pacing back and forth angrily.

"Thanks a lot Artemis!" I yelled. Great, now what was I supposed to do?

I doubt this would work, but I tried summoning my celestial silver knives and made slashes on the tent. The cuts immediately vanished in seconds. I scoffed indignantly before mentally allowing my knives to disappear. I laid on the bed, staring up at the tent's roof with a glare.

Talk about being grounded.

-o-

After staring at the ceiling for hours, and then practicing monotonously with my summoned weapons, I was bored out of my mind. The tent only consisted of a full size bed, table and chair, rug, and mirror stand. Artemis couldn't even install some TV or video games for me? What I wouldn't
give for a Wii right now…

Predictably, for the next hour I tried to convince Artemis to let me out, at least for a while.

It went something like this:

"Artemis, I'm hungry," I called out. I heard scuffling noises as the hunters all sat down near my tent. I picked up the smell of the fire and roasted meat, making my mouth water in hunger. They were mocking me with that picnic. I just knew it. "Can I please come out now?"

"Have you decided to give up those ridiculous plans?" she asked.

"No…"

I heard her snap her fingers as a plate of roasted meat appeared on my table. I breathed heavily.

"How convenient," I hissed, throwing my arms up before seating myself. "Can I have some utensils while you're at it?" A second later a knife and fork appeared beside the plate. I glared at the plate grudgingly before snatching the knife up and stabbing the meat as a way to vent.

"Thanks so much."

Artemis: 1 Me: 0

I tried again an hour later.

"I need to use the bathroom," I told her. "You got to let me out for that."

I could imagine Artemis smirking when she said this. "Not quite."

I heard her snap her fingers, and almost out of nowhere, a bucket appeared on the ground next to me. I stared at the bucket, completely and utterly dumbfounded.

Oh Hades no…

"You can't be serious!" I exclaimed in disbelief. "I am not doing my business in a bucket! Do you know how gross that is? It's not hygienic!"

Walt would faint if he saw this.

"Are you going to give up that foolishness?"

"No, but-!"

"Then hold it in," Artemis said snidely. "The bucket will disappear once you're done…if you decide to use it." With that said, I heard her go away.

I wrenched my hands in my hair and yelled in aggravation. I would not use the bucket! I will not!

After 3 insufferable hours…I used the bucket.

Did I mention how much I hated Artemis right now?

Artemis: 2. Me: 0

This continued on for three more days. I continued to use that horrid bucket whenever I'm forced to. I tried the silent treatment, and I even threatened to starve myself, which Artemis disproved after only
a day. I even tried guilt-tripping her, but she only ignored me. Just what was taking Walt so long?! Or was it because of Apollo? Artemis wouldn't listen to me, and after she saw me try to convince her hunters- namely Thalia, who went to talk to her about it- to let me out, she ordered them to stop talking to me too, and here I thought she wanted me to get to know them better.

It was the middle of the fourth night of my confinement, when all the hunters were getting ready to sleep, that I decided to undergo another outrageous attempt.

"ONE MISSISSIPPI! TWO MISSISSIPPI, THREE MISSISSIPPI! FOUR-!"

"Oh my gods Seth, will you shut up!" I heard Thalia yell at me.

"FIVE MISSISSIPPI! SIX MISSISSIPPI! SEVEN-!"

Eliza cried out, "Seth, I'm trying to sleep!"

"Someone open up his tent so I can beat him up!" Blaire yelled. "I don't care if-! Lady Artemis?!"

"Seth Hunter, what are you doing?!" Artemis said icily, judging from the shadows, I could tell she was standing right outside my enclosed tent. Oh wow, I even got her to come here in the middle of her work.

"I am demonstrating my protest!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "I tried reasoning with you! I tried being courteous! Apollo still hasn't arrived yet, so now I'm doing this! EIGHT MISSISSIPPI…"

"You are acting like an immature child, Seth! I expected better from you!"

"TEN MISSISSIPPI-You want better?! Then let me out! I'm dying in here!"

I could imagine Thalia rolling her eyes. "Dying of what?"

"BOREDOM!" I shouted. "DUH!"

I think I discovered the horrible side-effects of my claustrophobia.

"Lady Artemis, maybe we could just let him out a bit?" Eliza spoke up. "He's gone crazy…"

"I second that," Blaire grumbled. "My fists have been itching for a good pounding!" Soon, the rest of the hunters were begging for my release, all going according to my insane plan. That is, until Artemis spoke up.

"SETH HUNTER!" she thundered, effectively silencing out her hunters' complaints. I nearly choked in the middle of my rant. "If you do not cease this childish behavior, your confinement will be in my tent with a muffler over your mouth!"

There was a moment of silence.

"Zeus' feet," I muttered angrily, forced to give up.

Artemis: 5 Me….You know what? Screw this! Why was I even keeping track? Damn it all…

-0-

On the sixth day of my confinement, Artemis finally decided to have a personal chat with me. She excused the hunter posted there to another duty before I saw her silhouette stood beside the entrance.
"Seth?" she called softly.

I didn't answer her immediately, still nestled in the covers of my bed. Sleeping and staring off into space were now my activities as of late.

Artemis grew impatient. "Seth, if you are trying that silent treatment again…!"

"I'm not," I muttered.

"Good," she stated. "It's already been six days. Have you changed your mind?"

I rolled my eyes, turning on my side to face the wall. "For the last time, Artemis, I won't change my decision! This is getting pointless!"

"So this confinement isn't helping."

"You finally noticed?" I said sardonically. "By the way, how long are you going to keep me in this jail cell? Another week? A month? A year even? It's really starting to smell in here."

Artemis didn't let me out to take a shower or provide me a change of clothes. You could imagine the filthy, miserable condition I was in. She called it an incentive when it was actually a lost cause.

"I'm only trying to help you, Seth," Artemis said. Her tone sounded forced. "You must let go of this idiocy!"

"I'm only doing what's demanded of me by the prophecy, just like you did 15 years ago." I pointed out, and then I added starkly. "Is my creation an 'act of idiocy' on your part?"

"We will not digress from the topic, Seth." Artemis warned. "What I did back then was clearly stated- Completely different from your situation. Your interpretation of the prophecy leaves room for error."

I snapped my attention towards the front, slightly pissed. "Then why don't you tell me what I'm supposed to do then Artemis? Would that satisfy you? You seem very fond of keeping me on a short leash!"

I could imagine her narrowing her eyes dangerously. "Do not test me, child."

I hitched an uneven breath before walking over to the entrance, the two of us divided only by the thin silver tent.

"Then let's agree to be honest," I stated. "I don't trust you, and you don't trust me either. Truth?"

Artemis hesitated. "Trust is a privilege. It can only go two ways or none at all."

"So you don't trust me," I replied. She didn't answer, confirming my statement. I wasn't surprised. "If you did, I wouldn't be in here. You think that I don't have what it takes. Truth?"

"I do not believe you fully comprehend the danger you are asking for." Artemis said. "Your conjecture cannot be proven right."

"But it cannot be proven wrong either," I pointed out. "I thought through my prophecy a great deal, Artemis. These actions I plan to take are not spontaneous. I also discussed its contents with Walt and Lynetta already. They support me in my decision. Why can't you do the same?"

She lifted her chin. "You barely survived against Lycaon. You also refused to follow my orders at
the critical moment. How can you expect me to support you when your past actions dictate otherwise?"

"They are past actions," I bristled. "Mistakes that I've acknowledge and atoned for. What matters is how I am now! I've changed a lot since last we met, Artemis. Let me prove to you that I'm ready for this!"

Artemis was silent. She stood there, pondering through my words carefully, as if to be sure I wasn't lying.

I urged her. "Just name your conditions! If I can fulfill them, then you'll have no reason to deter me."

"Really?" she said narrowly, skeptical.

"Of course, they have to be humanly possible," I said quietly. "Besides, this incarceration idea isn't working. You said that yourself."

She grew quiet. Her silence caused me to become nervous. Would she accept my offer?

"I'll think about it," she said finally, and after a moment's pause, she left me alone once more.

_It's better than nothing, I told myself. I at least got Artemis to consider letting me out. I just hope those conditions she's thinking about aren't too harsh._

-o-

The next day, Artemis gave me her answer.

I heard the ripping sound of the tent opening and I knew instantly that my offer had been accepted. I was internally jumping for joy at the sight of freedom. Artemis came in as I stood up at the foot of my bed. My hair and clothes were a mess.

"You smell awful," Artemis said bluntly, wrinkling her nose. I only rolled my eyes. Who was responsible for that?

"I'll be sure to shower first thing," I said. "That is…if you are letting me out?"

She nodded briefly. I tried not to sing Hallelujah right then and there. I kept a blank face.

"I've thought about your proposal," she said sternly. "I decided that your offer had some merit, and in the end I came up with three conditions."

I mentally sighed in relief. It was only three.

"What are they?"

"You will complete a solo mission," Artemis said. "I will monitor your progress on the sidelines. If you can complete it to my gratification, then it will be your win. You are also required to follow any and all orders I give you without complaint. If you even think of disobeying me, I will not hesitate to have you locked in here again."

"I understand," I said quietly. I figured she would do something like this compared to last time. "Would that count as part of my training?"

"I'll be sure to inform Walt Forger of this assignment," she told me. "The next two conditions I will tell you only if you succeed on the first. Are we clear?"
"Crystal," I murmured.

"I will inform you the details after you bathe," Artemis said. She made a face. "How do you stand it for this long? The odor must be smothering in here!"

I shrugged, "I got used to it. Since I got you to reconsider, it was well worth it."

She frowned. "Don't make a habit of it."

I was about to comment when suddenly, there was a bright golden light. The hunters outside started to clamor. I felt the harsh aura of an Olympian god, and I felt my knees buckle slightly at the pressure. Artemis only rolled her eyes.

"I lower my guard down for one moment, and then he comes charging in," she muttered to no one in particular. She turned to go outside, and I instantly followed her.

The rush of cool, fresh air instantly turned my mood for the better. I felt like I was finally able to properly breathe. I took note of my surroundings, the camp site looking very similar to my time in Maryland. Before I could take in the specific details, the newly arrived sun god started shouting out demands in Ancient Greek:

"Where is he, sister?" he yelled furiously, "I do not care what reasons you have for keeping him here, but I swear by the Fates I will bring him back to Forger immediately!"

"Brother," Artemis chided. "I have already-!"

"No excuses!" Apollo interrupted, switching to English. "Now which tent are you keeping him in? I will turn this camp site upside down if you-!" He stopped when he noticed me. "Oh. Seth…y-you're right here?"

I gave a sheepish smile as I gave a bow. "You were a bit too late, Lord Apollo. I already convinced Lady Artemis to let me out."

"Oh." he repeated. He narrowed his eyes as he inspected me, his hands clasping my shoulders. "Look at you, my poor nephew! What horrors has my sister done to you this time? And that stench! This is definitely not okay."

Artemis looked aggravated. "Brother…"

"No need to fear Seth!" Apollo said, ignoring Artemis completely. His sister narrowed her eyes at his clear dismissal. "The most awesome Olympian has come to save the day!"

He snapped his fingers, and I was quickly engulfed in a swirl of radiance. When the light died out, the first thing I noticed was my new set of designer clothes: a dark blue polo shirt and shorts. My hair was brushed differently, and my whole body completely clean. Apollo even handed me a mirror, and I gagged when I saw my reflection. I looked like one of those corny, photo-shopped magazine covers. I quickly ruffled my hair back to how it was.

"That's much better!" he exclaimed, letting the mirror vanish in a poof! I wondered if he got those tricks from the she-witch. I shook my head out of it. "Now this calls for a haiku-!"

"BROTHER!" Artemis shouted, tired of being overlooked. I winced slightly. She sure made a lot of noise in that twelve year old body.

Apollo only gave a grin, oblivious to her chagrin. "No need to shout Arty! Can't you see I'm talking
to Seth here? You can give your cries of adoration to me later."

"Cries of… You have no business being here, Apollo!" Artemis hissed in anger. "You are disturbing me and my hunters! I want you out of here this instant!"

I took that moment to step away from the bickering twins, not wishing to be caught in the crossfire.

"Rude!" Apollo chastised. "I came all this way to present my glorious self and you want to kick me out?"

"Yes!"

Apollo huffed. "Ungrateful. That's what you are. Oh well, I never cared about what you think of me anyway." He turned to me with a big smile, his teeth so white and perfect dentists could only dream of. "So Seth, you ready to go?"

"Actually, I'm staying here for a while longer." I told him. "Lady Artemis and I had set a bargain."

Apollo instantly grew suspicious, his tone turned solemn. It still crept me out how fast his expressions changed. "What kind of bargain?"

"A bargain that concerns only Seth and me," Artemis cut in. "You're not needed here."

"But sister…!" he pouted.

"I would be grateful if you tell Walt Forger that Seth will be undergoing another mission from me," Artemis informed him. "That should put his worries to rest, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose," he said. "Sister, if you try to prevent Seth from completing his prophecy…I will be forced to put a stop to your actions."

"I won't, brother." Artemis said. "It all depends on how well he does. Isn't that right, Seth?"

I hesitated. I could mention how Artemis threatened to lock me up again if I failed, and then Apollo would likely intervene. But if I did that, I would lose Artemis' small amount of faith in me by breaking the conditions I had set up, and she wouldn't be as lenient with me in the future. I had a feeling Artemis wasn't one to give up easily. I inherited that trait all too well.

I gave a forced smile. "Yes. She's right. I'll be fine, Lord Apollo."

"If you're sure, then I have nothing to say," he said.

I gave a nod. "Thanks for coming by, and can you tell Walt I'll be back soon?"

"Sure thing, Seth," he told me, lifting a hand to ruffle my hair playfully. I held in my protest. "Looks like I'm the stand in messenger. Seriously sister, did you really have to take it out on my pal Hermes like that?"

"My shock got the best of me," she admitted quietly. "I'll be sure to make it up to him."

"Looks like I'm done here," he announced. He threw me a wink. "Give me a call anytime, Seth. If you want to chat or whatever, I'm free!"

"I'll hold you to that," I said.

He threw a smirk before he went into his divine form, completely out of sight when I uncovered my
eyes. I turned to Artemis, expectant of the details she had yet to inform me.

I hope I didn't come to regret my own deal.

-0-
Rescue

"Concentrate on what you want them to see," Thalia said. "Focus on it, and think on nothing else. Then, the Mist will definitely work in your favor."

"Got it," I said, strapping my newly acquired handguns. Each of them hanging on one thigh. It was soon night, and the cool air made its way inside the open tent.

Thalia gave a hesitant nod. "Good luck, Seth. I know you can do this."

"I won't disappoint," I said calmly. Hopefully.

She gave a reassuring smirk before she left me alone to prepare.

When I was finally given the mission’s details from Artemis this morning, I had requested that she asked Walt to send over my weapons. Walt got the gist of my situation, and Artemis came back in no time with two guns: a black Beretta 92 and a silver Springfield .45 ACP, along with magazines filled with imperial gold, celestial bronze and regular bullets. I gave only a brief glance at the offered weapons before taking them. Walt wanted me to focus only on artillery, and knowing where I was heading next, it was a good choice.

I reflected back to the details as I changed.

"Do you follow the mortal news?" Artemis asked me. I shook my head. I didn't.

"Just hours ago, there is a small private school that has become victim to a terrorist attack," Artemis said. "There was an evacuation, but unfortunately, a class of 30 students and three staff members are still trapped inside. Your mission is to rescue those hostage students and staff within that school while taking out any perpetrators you encounter."

"Since when did we get tangled in mortal matters?" I asked.

"It's not," she told me. "It is believed that one of those terrorists is a disguised monster, and it is confirmed that two of the students are demigods."

I gave a scoff. "So these monsters are growing bolder? Do you think those demigods are the reason for this attack?"

"Maybe," Artemis conceded, "The war with the Titans is drawing closer. Kronos is getting stronger, and he is in no doubt desperate for recruits or their elimination. You will be able to distinguish the demigods from the mortals by their small auras."

"So I got to get to them first," I said. So this mission was like when we recruited Bianca and Nico, only with more annoying pests and media coverage in the way. "Do I bring them to camp?"

She hesitated, "Camp Half-Blood isn't suitable right now."

"What do you mean?" I questioned narrowly.

"I received news of Camp Half-Blood undergoing an invasion threat."

"What?!" I exclaimed. "Since when?"

"The start of June," she answered. "Chiron informed me that a Quest has been issued to none other
than Annabeth Chase."

I relaxed slightly. If Annabeth was the one leading it, Percy would definitely be with her. With her quick wits and thinking, adding on Percy's input and abilities...I was sure Annabeth has already got the Quest in the bag. Those two always worked well together, much like Will and me.

"You can still change your mind, Seth," Artemis said softly. "I won't hold it against you if you decided to help your friends instead of going to the enemy. We can put a stop to this. I can send Thalia and my hunters to complete it instead, and I can even send you to Camp Half-Blood if you want to aid them so strongly."

I narrowed my eyes. "Good idea, Artemis, but I am not easily swayed. I will stick to my prior decision. I'm sure Annabeth's got everything figured out."

"Very well," Artemis muttered, looking a bit disappointed. "You have until the end of today to complete this task. Once you have the demigods in your custody, you will bring them here."

"Alright," I said. When I was about to leave, Artemis stopped me, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"Be careful," she warned. "Always check your surroundings. One miscalculation can make the difference between life and death."

She turned away from me and released her grasp before I could say anything aloud.

I turned and put on an offered bulletproof vest over my sleeveless shirt, before covering it up with a zipped jacket. I double checked again that the guns were strapped tightly. I have already disassembled them twice and cleaned them in order to make sure no malfunctions will occur during use.

When I finally came out of my tent, physically and mentally prepared, I was greeted by an old acquaintance. My hearing picked up rapid scrambling and barking before it pounced on me, causing me to stumble back, laughing. A familiar beagle gave my face a sloppy lick.

"Lappy!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here, boy?"

*I'm your mode of transportation.* Lappy communicated, settling in my arms as I stood back up. *The school is too far to walk, so Artemis told me to bring you.*

"Oh," I said. I haven't thought about my transport. Thankfully, Artemis got that figured out for me. "Thanks. So how have you been Lappy? I haven't seen you since last December."

*Lady Artemis is my present caretaker. I had been helping her track down her targets.*

"I see," I murmured, petting Lappy on the head and back as the beagle gave a whine of content. I remembered Artemis telling Zeus how she and Apollo were taking out the dangerous beasts before the war started. She and Lappy must have their work cut out for them. Lappy looked at me with curiosity.

*I see you are well, Seth Hunter. You've matured much since last we met."

"I guess I have," I said dryly. "That's only to be expected, Lappy, seeing as how I am mortal. We are meant to grow up fast."

*True, but it never ceases to amaze me what Time can do.*
I smirked. "Has Artemis informed you of my mission?" Lappy gave a nod. "So you know where this school is?"

*We will be visiting Blakly Academy of Fine Arts, located in Caldwell, Idaho.*

Idaho. I was on the other side of America this whole time. That was a whole stretch away from Massachusetts. No wonder Walt took so long.

"Then let's get going."

-0-

When we arrived at the scene, the whole school was surrounded by police cars. There was no in and out of this place unless you had certification, and I noticed ambulances and fire engines. The yellow 'Do not Cross' tape was wrapped around the borders twice to keep the news vehicles and reporters out. My hearing picked up the reporters' speech.

"It is now known that there are *five* armed terrorists," a female reporter said. "Two of them are seen with AK-47s with a total of at least 30 students of varied ages."

A male reporter from another station followed. "Police are undergoing negotiations right now, and so far, the terrorists have yet to send a reply. What could be the purpose of this attack? Is it for monetary gains? An act of anarchy?"

Just a couple meters back, Lappy slowed down, and came to a stop. The Mist must be working because no one turned to see me aboard a 6 foot tall bloodhound. Lappy and I eventually parted ways after Lappy informed me that he would be nearby if I needed to get out fast.

"How will you know where to meet me?" I inquired.

*You and I have a familiar bond. You will be able to just call me mentally,* Lappy told me. *No matter where you are, I will find you.*

"Wow, I sure didn't know that until now," I muttered. How convenient. "So it's like an empathy link? Like the one between Grover and Percy?"

*It's similar, but it is more like mental communication. Familiar bonds do not send messages through dreams and the message will be sent regardless if one is awake or asleep. If one of us were to die, the other will remain unaffected. I swore an oath to aid and protect Lady Artemis, and because of your relation to her, the oath extends to you.*

"I see," I said. "So what you are doing right now, I'm able to hear and understand you because of this bond right?" Lappy nodded. "Interesting. Are there any restrictions I should be aware of?"

*Yes. This is where empathy links have the advantage: Distance would not matter for empathy links, but if I am too far away from you, our communication is broken.*

"How far are we talking about?"

*250 miles.*

I scoffed lightly as I dismounted. "That shouldn't be a problem here. I'll call for you soon, Lappy. Just make sure you stay hidden. Even with the Mist, we don't know if there are other monsters in the area."
Yes, Lappy said. *I'll be sure to heed your advice. Be careful.*

Lappy sped off at cheetah speed before I could say anything else, causing a puff of smoke to engulf me. I sneezed and patted my jacket to get the dust off me. I turned and analyzed the busy setting, while minimizing my demigod scent.

"Here goes," I whispered. I snapped my fingers, willing the Mist to do its work as I walked past the vehicles and towards the sealed off entrance.

*Please let me in, please let me in...!*

An officer holding a clipboard threw me a glance as I was about to pass the yellow tape.

"Hey you," he started. I felt my heart speed up. "What took you so long?!

"Huh?"

"You're that negotiator the FBI were asking for aren't you? You better hurry, they don't tolerate tardiness well."

I mentally sighed in relief. "Oh...um, could you direct me to the back entrance?" He pointed the direction with a thumb. I quickly thanked him and crossed into the no zone area. After swerving and maneuvering in some foliage, I finally reached the doors, unlocked, and quickly shut it quietly behind me.

I was met with an empty hallway. There were sets of closed doors ahead of me, and there was no one in sight. I walked down cautiously, making my footsteps as light as possible. When I turned a corner, there was an intersection. One led to the stairs and another further down the ground floor. I didn't see or hear anyone here.

*This would be a good escape route, I thought. Once I find the hostages, I can tell them to go out this door.*

I decided to scan the ground floor first. Surprisingly, it only took me around 10 minutes max, and I had no encounters with the hostages or terrorists. I also found one of the offices and located a school map, which told me that the classrooms were mostly on the second and third floor. Artemis had told me there was an evacuation, so it's most likely that the hostages were on the third floor since they would be the last to go out.

I carefully made my way up to the second floor, holding fully loaded guns in both hands. I had celestial bronze bullets on my right, and regular bullets on my left. If I did encounter any *mortal* terrorists, I only hoped to render them useless, not kill.

As I turned a corner, I heard shouting and loud footsteps. I swerved to avoid being noticed, but kept an eye out as two hooded men were dragging a guy in a baseball cap by the arms. One of the hostages?

"I'm warning you fellas!" the 'hostage' shouted, struggling to get out of their reach. "Let go or the both of you will be pulverized to next week!" The men laughed.

"Just look at him," one of them chuckled. "Midget thinks he's so tough."

"I am more than tough!"

"I wonder why the boss wants us to interrogate him separately." his partner commented.
"Yeah, as if he would know anything," he said. "He's a pain in the ass."

"It's under my job description!" the hostage barked. "I ain't gonna tolerate evil mortals like you!"

My eyes narrowed. What did he just say?

"Can you believe this guy?" the thug laughed. "Calling us mortals like he isn't. What a lunatic."

When they dragged him out of my line of sight, I silently knelt down and moved quickly to the next corner. I widened my eyes in surprise when I saw the 'hostage' more clearly.

A satyr… He was a satyr.

Despite the fact that he was wearing baggy jeans and a cap to hide his identity, I could tell due to the existence of an unfamiliar aura, which was resonating from the hostage. Plus, his height and facial hair were clear indicators of his race. The two man-handling him were mortals, who had no idea what they were dealing with.

I nearly smacked a hand to my forehead. When Artemis told me I was to find demigods in a school, I should have realized satyrs would be involved. Their job as protectors demanded that they attend nearly every mortal school available, even remote ones like this. Overlooking such a critical detail… I blamed my homeschooling.

I would have to rescue the satyr first, I thought. The satyr knew where the rest of the hostages were, and that knowledge alone would save me a whole lot of time and effort. I moved into position, about to shoot when the satyr suddenly clenched his captives' arms, twisting them and landing both of them on the ground headfirst with a loud slam! The terrorists didn't even have the chance to cry out.

O-Kay… maybe he didn't need any rescuing. I placed my guns back in their holsters.

"I warned you!" the satyr said cockily. "I didn't take jujitsu and karate for nothing! No one messes with the Coach-!" he stopped, appearing apprehensive as he sniffed the air.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

I looked around, noticing no one. Wait, was he talking to me?

"Come out! Only cowards hide themselves!"

I clenched my teeth, slightly irritated at being found out. I straightened and walked out of my hiding spot. The satyr saw me, and next thing I knew, he started attacking.

"Hi-yah!" the satyr yelled, aiming a punch at my side before I moved out of range. I didn't even get the chance to explain as I kept dodging the kicks and punches directed at me.

"Stop!" I shouted, raising my hands. "I'm on your side!"

"Nice try!" the satyr retorted. "But I've heard that line before!"

"I'm telling the truth!" I said. "You're a satyr aren't you? I'm here for the kids!"

The satyr stopped, eying me suspiciously. "You know what I am, cupcake?"

"Yeah, Lady Artemis sent me." I told him. A second later, the satyr punched my abdomen, causing my knees to buckle. "Ow! What did you do that for?!"
"I knew it! You were trying to trick me!" the satyr said indignantly.

"I'm not!"

"You said Artemis sent you." the satyr repeated. "Lady Artemis would never send a guy to do her work. Your info on mythology is screwed up!"

"I'm serious here!" I said, offended. "Can't you like, I don't know, tell that I'm a demigod with that nose of yours?"

The satyr stared at me before lowering his hands and giving a sniff. "You smell funny."

"I figured," I said sarcastically, getting back up. My abdomen still felt a little sore, but it was healing. "But you know I'm not a mortal or a monster now. Like I said before, I'm only here for the kids, and I guess the other mortals too. I found an available escape route on the ground floor, and there could be more."

"You're telling the truth," the satyr muttered in disbelief. "Artemis really sent you?"

I grew impatient. "Yes. Can you tell me where the rest of them are now?"

"Alright, alright! Hold your horses!" the satyr said, walking ahead before I caught up. "They're not far from here. The rest of those thugs are in there though. One of them is definitely a baddie."

"This 'baddie' wouldn't happen to be their boss would it?" I murmured.

"Right on, cupcake," the satyr said. He noticed my weapons. "What's with that get up anyway? Don't you have a sword or knife with you?"

"We are also dealing with mortal enemies," I told him. I reached my right gun, and held it up. "This gun holds celestial bronze bullets. They may not harm mortals, but the presence of a gun is enough to scare them." I decided not to mention the regular bullets in my left magazine. I didn't know what satyrs thought about harming mortals, but I rather not get into that discussion right now.

"Good thinking," the satyr muttered. He held out a hand. "The name's Gleeson Hedge, but you can call me Coach Hedge or just Coach. Sorry for punching you like that. No hard feelings?"

I glanced at his offered hand a moment longer before shaking it. "Sure, Coach. I'm Seth Hunter. Do you always act first and ask questions later?"

"My life's motto," he said. "The kids we're looking for are siblings: Reeve and Caroline Rayler, age 12 and 11. So far, they haven't got a clue as to who they are yet."

"That's good, but what about the monster?" I asked.

"He's picking and guessing," Coach Hedge said. "He's only just showed up, so he hasn't had time to investigate them fully. He thinks there's only one of them. Before I was dragged out, he's trying to narrow down the choices by sniffing them one at a time."

"Why not just kill all of them at once?" I questioned. Coach Hedge threw me a look. "What? It saves time. He'll get what he wants in the end."

"It's the ancient laws," he said. "Our world can't intervene with the mortals too deeply. Killing one or two mortals would be permitted, but a group of them with the media right outside? That's a big no."

"Then let's get going," I said hurriedly. "We'll give him other matters to worry about."
Soon, the Coach and I were by the door, listening as the three remaining thugs surrounded a group of students, two of them with AK-47s. They were the ones the news reporters mentioned. I noticed a young female teacher, her wrists tied behind her back. Another man was tied beside her, who looked like he was fresh out of college, probably an assistant.

The children were huddled together. I noticed how a light brown haired boy held hands with the girl beside him, who had the same colored hair tied in a single braid. I locked eyes on them and after concentrating very hard, I felt a barely visible aura resonating from both kids. It was so little that I had a hard time sensing it. I guessed that was the reason the monster hadn't found them out yet.

"Is it those two?" I asked quietly. Coach Hedge nodded, confirming my earlier assessment.

"How about this one boss?" one of the underlings said. Since I couldn't see from my position, I could only hear the whimpering of a young boy.

Their boss spoke. "He's not it! Another!" His voice was raspy, like he didn't drink water for days, and for every word he spoke, there was a continuous echo- like this boss figure wasn't just one being. He was definitely a 'baddie'.

"Here's the plan," I whispered to the Coach, who was about to charge in there like a bull if I hadn't stopped him. "When we move in, you will free the adults and take all the kids to the escape route I mentioned. There will be police there waiting. I'll stay to take care of the boss and his underlings."

"Oh no," Coach Hedge protested. "I'm not about to let you have all the fun to yourself!"

"This isn't 'fun'!" I snapped. "You need to get Reeve and Caroline out of here! I don't need any-!"

"I don't know why Artemis sent you Seth," Coach Hedge interrupted, "but my job as a protector demands that I protect all demigods. That includes you. I'll let you do the fighting, but if you see the chance to escape with us, you better take it or else I will be staying with you!"

This was not going as I calculated. Ever since I encountered the satyr, my previous plans were now completely messed up. This was what happened when I didn't factor in all outcomes. Now, I got a stubborn satyr who wouldn't let me do things alone, and there was no time for arguments.

"Fine," I forced out, taking both guns out. "Let's do this."

"That's what I'm talking about!" The satyr leaped to his feet, and a second later, both of us charged in.

I shot the first terrorist I saw in the leg as Coach Hedge tackled the other mortal terrorist like an NFL quarterback. The terrorist crumbled to the ground, gasping in pain. Some of the children screamed. The boss hissed at me in anger.

"Intruder!" he screamed. "Demigod scum! I will kill you!"

I pointed my gun at his head. "Not if I do it first!"

I shot three rounds straight at his head, and the body sank to the ground. There was ash seeping out of the clothes, and the sound of hissing. The monster wasn't dead. I shot another few rounds, hoping to kill it, but instead the hissing grew even more pronounced. Not good. Coach Hedge had already freed the two staff members.
"You saved us," the mortal woman said to him.

"We need you both to take the students to the ground floor and go out the exit down an empty hallway. Do you know where that is?" I asked, giving them a quick glance. They nodded quickly. "Go now! The enemy isn't defeated yet."

"But I saw you shoot him!" the man said. "He must be dead!"

Before I could answer, there was screaming. I turned, and my face must have turned paler at the swarm of snakes erupting from the ashes. Each of them was an arm's length, with white horns circling its neck like a crown. My study of monsters identified the snakes as basilisks, also known as the snake king. There were at least a dozen of them, maybe more.

"What are those things!?" the woman shrieked.

I didn't answer. I was too busy shooting the basilisks, their heads exploding with a snap before vanishing in gold dust. I replaced my left gun with celestial bronze bullets, and shot any basilisk that came too close. One of them breathed fire at me and I swerved to dodge the flames. I shot at them, but the remaining basilisks moved fast enough to dodge most of my hits. A couple spat venom and the ones I avoided hit the floor and desks, deteriorating them in seconds. Some of the poison caught on my sleeve, and I quickly took off my jacket and threw it at the snakes. The jacket had instantly eroded.

"What the hell?!" The injured thug I shot before screamed. He shot rounds of bullets, causing the kids to cower and scramble about. Predictably, the regular bullets did no damage, only angered the snakes even more as they quickly slithered towards him, biting him to death.

The thug screamed in agony. I stood there, completely shocked as the venom spread throughout his body, burning his insides out. While I was still shooting the snakes, he called out to me.

"Please…!

he said, his eyes pleading.

I clenched my teeth as I quickly replaced my left magazine. A moment later, I shot the thug in the head, ending his misery for good.

Meanwhile, the kids panicked, and ran out of the room in terror as the snakes slithered across the clearing. Coach Hedge grabbed a meter stick and swatted the menaces out of the way as the teachers got out, throwing the stick out when he noticed the venom. The adults quickly called for the children to regroup, and they soon headed down the hall towards the stairs. I didn't see Reeve or Caroline in that group. They must have got out much earlier. What I did notice were the remaining snakes going in the opposite direction. It seemed they have finally smelled out their targets.

I heard a resounding crash behind me. I saw how the floor of the room we were in had caved in. The poison may have stopped spreading, but the acid had eroded one of the building's cornerstones. There were cracks spreading across the walls. This building was going to go down in less than 20 minutes. I didn't need to be an architect to know that.

I raced after the snakes' trail. Coach Hedge followed. I finally located them in another classroom, the two of them standing on a desk with bottles of chemicals in their arms. It was a chemistry room.

"Get back!" Reeve shouted. He threw a glass bottle at them, and it hit one of the basilisks on the head, shattering the liquid contents all over it. "Go away!"

"You heard the kid!" Coach Hedge said. He lifted a desk and slammed it against the basilisks, slithering away to avoid impact, "Reeve! Caroline! Get over here now!"
"Coach Hedge!" Caroline said; her face relieved for a moment. Reeve was still tossing chemical bottles at the snakes, before his sister shook him out of it. "That's enough! Let's go!"

Reeve nodded, throwing another flask in anger before complying. Once the kids were out of the room, the snakes tried to follow us. However, one of them decided to spurt out fire, and the chemicals soaking them turned out to be highly flammable, and lit them all up like barbecue. The room quickly turned into a furnace.

When Reeve and Caroline were about to head towards the staircase, I stopped them.

"You can't go down," I told them. "The building is unstable. We'll get buried alive."

"Then where can we go?!" Caroline cried.

"Who are you?" Reeve demanded. "Why did you help us?"

"I was asked to," I said briefly, and then I asked, "Coach, is there a door that leads to the rooftop?"

"Yeah there is!" Coach Hedge said, almost giddy. "I should've thought of that one! Come on, cupcakes!"

Coach Hedge took the lead, while I took the rear. As we ran, I felt the building shake violently.

"Stay down!" I shouted, trying to maintain my balance. There was more rumbling as each of us ceased movement. When the shaking has ended, I gave them the go signal, each of us taking a careful step before finally reaching the entrance to the rooftop.

"So what now?" Reeve asked when we were all out. He glanced down, his face appeared squeamish. "Do we call for the firefighters?"

"No time," I stated. "This building will be done for before they get the ladder to us. I got a friend who can help."

"What kind of a friend?" Coach Hedge asked.

I smirked despite the situation. I closed my eyes and concentrated.

_Lappy, do you hear me?_

_Seth? You need me right now?_

_Yes, I need you to be at the south side of the building, right by the walls. The academy is deteriorating. My buddies and I are going to make a leap._

_I'll be there. Tell your friends to prepare now._

"Okay, you guys." I said. "I want you all to stand on this ledge."

_"We're going to jump?!!" Reeve screeched. "We'll die!"_

_"You won't die," I said, rolling my eyes. "Lappy will catch all of you. No need to worry."_

_"B-but I can't! I'm scared of heights!" Reeve protested. I raised an eyebrow. This kid could take out basilisks and he's afraid of heights?_

_"Reeve, just listen to him!" Caroline shouted, frustrated. She and the Coach were already on. "Hey,
is that him?"

I looked down, and saw my favorite bloodhound, *Right on time, Lappy. Good job.*

*I try, sir.*

"That's him." I said. The building shook again. "*Now jump!*"

Without a second thought, Caroline and Coach Hedge leaped over the edge. Reeve, much to my aggravation, was still going at a turtle's pace to stand on the damn ledge.

"Reeve, close your eyes," I told him sternly. He whipped his head around at me.

"What?"

"*Just close your eyes.*" I repeated. "You won't have to jump if you do."

"But the building…where else…?"

"I'll find another way," I promised him.

"Oh, um okay," he said, closing his eyes.

The moment he closed them, I quickly ran, grabbed his waist, and leaped down. It would have felt exhilarating if Reeve wasn't screaming my ears off. We landed safely on Lappy's back.

"You tricked me!" Reeve said indignantly. "You said I didn't have to jump!"

I shrugged. "I didn't trick you. I said *you* didn't have to jump. I did the jump *for you.*"

"That's still a trick!"

"I got you down. Quit complaining."

"Wait a sec, Lappy as in the *Laelaps*?!" Coach Hedge said. I nodded. "Dog, it is good to see you back!"

*I'm glad to be back too, satyr.*

"He says he's also glad to be back," I translated. "Now hold on you guys. Lappy goes really fast. Don't want any of you guys falling. Can you take this many at once, Lappy?"

*I can, but my speed will be reduced.*

"That's okay," I told him. "Just take us to Artemis as fast as you can."

"You are one reckless demigod Seth," Coach Hedge grinned. *Reckless is good!*"
The trip back was anything but silence.

Coach Hedge was very enthusiastic towards Lappy and I. He asked questions about how long it's been since Lappy was released from the stars, and how the bloodhound and I were acquainted. Naturally, I acted as translator. The two demigods we rescued were silent for the most part. I thought they would have been bursting with questions about who they really were, but they just seemed exhausted. Caroline eventually grew curious, and Coach Hedge and I were the ones that gave her a gist of our mythological world.

"Time out," Reeve said. He had a hand to his forehead, struggling to understand. "You are telling us that one of our parents is a god?"

"That's right," I told him. "Those snakes you saw back there? Those are basilisks…"

"You mean like in Harry Potter?" Caroline interrupted. "But I thought basilisks could kill people with a single glance?"

I shook my head. "Not these fortunately, and as you noticed, they're much smaller than the one in the movie. Anyway, those basilisks attacked the school to get to you guys. Monsters always hunt down demigods, and because they are a type of essence, they can be regenerated. So those monsters you read about in the myths are all here at present time."

"No way," Reeve muttered.

"Yes way," Coach Hedge said, "which is why the two of you must start your training as soon as possible. I planned on taking you to Camp Half-Blood, but Seth had other plans." Seeing Reeve and Caroline's confusion, I explained.

"It's a safe haven for demigods like you." I explained. "Well, it was safe until recently. The Titan Army is currently finding a way to invade. That's why I convinced Coach Hedge to take you to Lady Artemis' camp instead, where you guys will stay temporarily."

"Lady Artemis?" Caroline gasped, widening her pale blue eyes. "You mean the Artemis?"

I nodded. "The very one. Just be cautious around her and her hunters. In fact, if you ever encounter any of the gods, always be careful in what you say. Some of them take respect very seriously, and can be offended easily. You get on their bad side… well, don't say I didn't warn you."

Coach Hedge gave a scoff. "You make the gods sound like the bad guys."

I stared at him. "Take it how you will. Reeve and Caroline need to know what they're getting into. It's best I tell them now than later." I turned towards Caroline. "Despite what I said, I'm very sure Artemis will take a liking to you. She's partial towards maidens, and may offer you a choice of joining her hunters."

"What do these Hunters do?" she asked, slightly spooked by what I said earlier.

"They are like her sister in arms," I said. "They train, hunt, and serve Artemis all their lives. They
teach you archery and combat, along with dual wielding. They are also offered partial immortality, which means they can only die in battle, but never age and fall ill. If you join them, they will welcome you with open arms."

"That sounds like a good deal," Caroline replied.

"Doesn't it?" I stated. "But there's a catch: you can never fall in love. The Hunters have a thing against romance and guys. The moment you do, you will be forced to quit the Hunters, and Artemis will take away your immortality. Still sound like a good deal?"

"I don't know," Caroline said. "I never even thought about romance."

"So Artemis doesn't like guys." Reeve said. I nodded. "Then what about me? She's not going to turn me into some animal is she?"

"She better not!" Caroline said. "You're my brother, Reeve. If Artemis recruits me, I won't let her do anything to you."

"That's nice of you, Caroline." I stated. "You don't need to worry about your safety, Reeve. You'll be staying with me. Artemis…tolerates me to an extent, so you will be fine. Once Camp Half-Blood is secure again, Coach Hedge will take you both there, unless Caroline decides to stay. Won't you Coach Hedge?"

"Of course," Coach Hedge said proudly. "I'm responsible for you both, remember? Reeve, you will love Camp once you see it! They have the best strawberries, and a cool arena where you fight as much as you like! Not to mention a lava wall, cleaning harpies, and the old centaur, Chiron. Oh! You get to meet Mr. D too-awesome guy. He turned this bloke into a dolphin once!" Reeve looked ready to be sick.

I cut in. "Coach, you're making the camp sound like Sparta."

"Sparta is awesome!" Coach Hedge pointed out.

"Why am I not surprised?" I muttered. Coach Hedge shrugged. "Camp Half-Blood is really great, Reeve. We camp out a lot, and the food there is always amazing. You will make new friends, and depending on your parent, new siblings too. I haven't seen Camp for a while, and I'm dying to go back. Of course you got to train and all, but it's still a lot of fun. Maybe someday, I'll take you to see the nymphs and the pegasi."

I knew Reeve would perk up at that. Everyone loves the pegasi. "Pegasi? Really?"

I nodded. "Just remind me sometime. I have a friend who's really good with horses."

Soon, Lappy stopped at the campsite. The hunters were in the middle of dinner when they noticed us arrive. I helped Reeve and Caroline down, while Coach Hedge flipped himself over to ground level. I also saw Artemis coming to greet us, and seeing her made me remember one more crucial fact.

"I almost forgot to tell you," I said to the Rayler siblings. "No matter what you do, don't say anything about Artemis' appearance. The gods can change their looks at will: their age, their hair color, height…so no matter what they look like, be on your guard." They nodded quickly.

"Seth," Artemis called, standing in front of us. "I see you brought some companions. The mission went well?"

"It did," I told her. "We had a bit of a reptilian problem, but my companions and I took care of
them." I stepped aside to let Artemis see the Rayler siblings. "This is Reeve and Caroline Rayler, and this is Coach Hedge, the satyr protecting them. Reeve, Caroline, Coach- this is Lady Artemis."

"Nice to meet you, Lady Artemis!" Coach Hedge exclaimed, giving a little bow. "Might I add you have a great taste in scenery, and sending Seth over? He was a huge help!"

Artemis gave a small smile. "I'm glad my child was able to be of assistance."

"You bet he was! With the way we leaped down-!" Coach Hedge stopped. "Whoa, wait, your child? Seth is…" He looked at me and then Artemis, finally noticing the similarities. "Oh!"

"No wonder you said I would be fine with you." Reeve said. Caroline was looking at me with curiosity.

"You… didn't tell them?" Artemis said slowly.

"I forgot," I mumbled. "Coach, Artemis is my creator. She made me, you see. It's like one of Athena's brain children."

"Brain children?!" Reeve echoed. I shot him a look that said later.

"So what are you?" Caroline asked. She quickly reiterated when she noticed my frown. "Well, you said she 'created' you so…are you different from us?"

"To be honest, I don't really know what to call myself," I said. "I usually went with 'demigod', even though I'm not. It's easier to go with people's assumptions."

"This is so confusing," Reeve mumbled.

I rolled my eyes. "You're telling me. Anyway, Artemis could we have them settled in? They're pretty tired. I could take Reeve and Coach Hedge. As for Caroline…"

"Of course," Artemis said, and then she called, "Phoebe, would you mind helping Caroline? She will need a place to sleep. Help her set up a tent."

"Yes, my Lady," Phoebe bowed before gesturing the girl to follow. "Come on." She and her brother shared a glance before the girl went with her.

Artemis snapped her fingers and a silver roll appeared in her hand. Reeve gaped. "Satyr, this is a tent you can roll out. Everything will be provided. You and the boy will stay together. If you have difficulty, you call Seth, but for now I need to speak with him."

"Okay Lady Artemis," Coach Hedge said giddily, taking the silver tent roll. "Let's go, Reeve!" Reeve quietly followed him, throwing a glance at me and Artemis before leaving.

I replied, "you wanted a report from me?"

"I want you to explain what you did," Artemis said. "The mortal news stated that the whole academy is now crumbled to the ground."

"That wasn't me," I protested. "It was the basilisks…" I began my tale of how I infiltrated the building, met up with Coach Hedge and the kids, and how the snakes caused their own demise. Lastly, I told her my plan of jumping from the roof and having Lappy take us away from the scene. "All of the hostages got out, I'm sure of it." I told her.
"Yes, I heard that on the news." Artemis said. "Well done, Seth. Though the outcome wasn't one I predicted, you exceeded my expectations."

"Were you expecting me to fail?"

"No," Artemis said after a pause. "I didn't think you would fail a mission so simple."

"Then why did you assign it?" I asked narrowly. "Why not give a harder condition for me to fulfill?"

"It was a request from my brother actually," Artemis answered. "Those two children are his."

Oh…the mission suddenly made so much sense. Apollo must have made that request with Artemis earlier, since I didn't hear him say anything about it the other day.

"Technically speaking, Reeve and Caroline are my cousins?" I asked.

"Technically," she murmured.

"How does this relation thing work with me anyway?" I questioned. "You told me how I was only related to you, but because of who I am, I am also related to Apollo. But not as uncle and nephew as most would expect."

"You realize that our signatures are different than mortal DNA," Artemis reminded. "Our signatures are a part of us, but it is one we can morph and control. When I made you as my heir, I simply changed the 'coding' on the signature I gave you by making you related only to me."

"What about Apollo?"

"That was a surprise to me," she admitted. "It was something that I didn't predict or could avoid due to the method I used."

I closed my eyes briefly to think. "In other words, you morphed the signature you placed in me so that you (and Lord Apollo) are my only relatives." She didn't say anything, only stared at me in acknowledgment. "Why did you do that?"

Artemis folded her arms. "What do you mean by 'why'?"

"You could have chosen not to morph the signature," I pointed out. "If you haven't done that, I would be able to call Apollo my 'uncle' instead of a second cousin. It shouldn't make any difference to you."

Artemis narrowed her eyes. "Are you unhappy with what I did?"

"No," I muttered. "I'm just confused. You can say I am trying to understand more about myself."

"Then just tell me outright, Seth," Artemis replied. "Despite what I am to you, I cannot predict everything you do. I'm right here if you have any questions." She tilted her head slightly, appearing concerned. "You look tired. Why don't we save this conversation for later? We will be heading to Seattle tomorrow morning."

"Seattle?"

"Your second task will take place there, so make sure you rest tonight." Artemis answered. "You will be at a disadvantage if you don't."

"Fine," I said. I didn't think Artemis would have the second task prepared so quickly. I walked past
her as I said, "good night, Lady Artemis."

"Good night...Seth."

-o-

By next morning, we headed towards Seattle.

Artemis had yet to fill me with the details, but I could tell this task was going to be much harder than the first. For one, this task wasn't a request from someone else, but Artemis' own idea, which was bound to be triple the trouble. I was on Lappy's back while Reeve and Coach Hedge sat there with me. Reeve was starting to get a little more relaxed, even though I heard he had fainted last night after realizing what Coach Hedge really was.

As I discreetly observed Reeve, I noticed how he didn't fit the 'Apollo kid' description. Appearances aside, Reeve wasn't that talkative, and he seemed more introverted. If I had to guess, I would have thought Reeve was a son of Athena or maybe a son of Hermes with the way he and his sister ran from those snakes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Caroline sitting with the Hunters in the back of Artemis' chariot. Phoebe and Elena were already laughing alongside her, and I would bet half my drachmas that Caroline will be staying with the Hunters.

We soon came to a stop once we entered another forest region just a couple miles away from the city. The trees were still dripping wet from the recent rain. I breathed in the aroma of fresh pine and cedar. My body feeling soothed from the nature around me. I felt at home instantly.

Once everyone started to unpack, Artemis finally told me the details of my second task.

"You will be destroying a Monster Donut," Artemis announced. All of the hunters who were listening slackened, and their faces suddenly became grim. Thalia was even fidgeting with her hands behind her back.

As for me, I actually laughed it off. In my defense, I was really ignorant at the time. "Hold it... you're telling me that I am going to take on a Monster Donut?"

"That's correct." Artemis confirmed.

"You're not joking?"

"I rarely joke." she deadpanned. "Seth, if you think you can't handle this..."

"Of course I can," I said without thinking. "It's too bad I didn't bring my silverware. Maybe you have a monster-size fork and knife with you?"

All of the hunters and Artemis stared at me like I grew a second head. Blaire, however, burst out laughing, causing my face to redden with embarrassment. I knew instantly that I said something really stupid.

"So there is stuff you don't know!" Blaire guffawed. "Monster donuts...that's rich!" She continued to laugh obnoxiously, much to my annoyance.

I maintained a calm composure, despite mental images of me flipping Blaire over in a wrestling match. "Can someone tell me what a Monster Donut is?"
"Thalia," Artemis said with an amused smile. "Do you mind?" Thalia shook her head.

Thalia came over and led me away with a hand on my shoulder as the others continued to unpack. When we finally reached the inside of her tent, she explained, "Monster Donuts aren't literally what they're called."

"Oh yeah, like Blaire's taunt wasn't a big hint," I said sarcastically. Thalia gave me a stern glare, as if to say: *Don't play with me.*

I gave a scowl before shutting up. Mentally, I thought that face of hers would make a good warning sign.

"A Monster Donut is a store," Thalia explained. "They sell donuts and pastries, but they only sell them to monsters. They're very popular. I'm surprised you never seen one. I heard they were all over New York."

"I was kind of isolated," I said quietly. "I didn't get to go out too much. There was always something that needed my attention at the orphanage I was in."

"Oh yeah, you told me that once," Thalia reminisced. "I can't even imagine what it's like there."

"Orphanages aren't...bad," I said. "Not the one I was in anyway. I guess Artemis had good insight in choosing that place for me. It's just..."

"It's just...?"

"I missed out," I muttered. "All that time I was at St. Clair's...I never got the chance to go to a regular school, go on vacation or even play a video game. I didn't know what it was like to 'hang out' at a friend's place. Manhattan was the farthest place I've ever ventured out to. My world back then seems so small compared to now."

"Then what did you even do?" Thalia asked. "From what you told me, that life you had sounds so boring."

I gave a small laugh. "Maybe, but I was okay with it. I like children and my guardian always bought me new books to read whenever there was some money left to spare. Those books always gave me a sort of comfort you know? All of those fantasy worlds...it left me with some hope of getting out there and maybe make a name for myself."

"I never knew you were a bookworm," Thalia said. "No wonder you and Annabeth are best pals. Doesn't the dyslexia bother you?"

"It does, but it shouldn't stop me from doing what I enjoy. It certainly isn't a problem now with the Ancient Greek versions offered at camp, though I barely read for pleasure these days." I paused. "Anyway, I digress. You were going to tell me more about these Monster Donuts?"

She nodded. "The problem with these Monster Donuts is that they are connected to the monsters' life force, and because of this, they pop up really fast. Like this one time, Annabeth, me, and...and Luke," She managed out. "We encountered one of these stores on our way to camp. It just came up out of nowhere. We tried fighting the monsters at first, but we were outnumbered and were forced to run."

"Define monsters."

Thalia only looked at me intently, her stare still pretty intimidating. "Hydras."
"Great," I muttered. I've never encountered a hydra before, but from what I read, Hydras made Lycaon a pansy. "I thought Artemis was mocking me when she asked if I needed help."

"Taking down a Monster Donut is a serious deal," Thalia said. "It's really a hydra's nest. For every head severed, another new head meant a new Monster Donut. It takes at least three hunters to take down a single hydra. It would be suicide if you do it alone."

I clenched my hand into a fist. "That's the whole point isn't it? Artemis is trying to make me fail! She wants me to give in and listen to her demands!"

"You don't know that!" Thalia protested, placing her hands on my shoulders so I was facing her. "Artemis never said this was a 'solo mission' did she? She even suggested you get some help."

I shrugged off her hands, turning my back to her. I rubbed my hand against my forehead, trying to calm down and think. Thalia did have a point: Artemis never said I was to do this alone. So maybe I still have a chance at this? I couldn't start thinking about failure when I haven't even tried. Lynetta would agree with that.

"Okay," I said finally. "I'll ask Artemis to clarify."

-o-

It turned out Thalia was right after all, but I wasn't about to admit it with that smug look on her face.

"You will be allowed to take two of my hunters with you, but you must deal the finishing blow in order to gain my satisfaction." Artemis said. "I will be watching to monitor your progress. Now choose."

All of the Hunters surrounded me, looking at me with amusement and curiosity. I got to pick two of them to help me. Even without looking around, I already knew who one of them would be.

"Thalia," I said. "Would you like to help me out? It will be great to fight alongside a daughter of Zeus."

Thalia smirked, "I was going to volunteer anyway. Someone's got to make sure you don't land yourself in trouble."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I grinned. "As for the second person..." I looked around until I found the hunter I needed. "Phoebe, would you like to join us?"

I wasn't sure why I picked her. My other option would have been Blaire. She's a daughter of Ares, and fighting was right up her alley. Phoebe, however, was kind of a mystery to me. I knew she was good with tracking and dual wielding, but that's it. I didn't even know who her godly parent was, but I could tell she was one of the senior hunters here. Her experience would come in handy.

Phoebe stood up from where she was sitting, sharing a brief glance with Thalia before saying "sure." Artemis gave a brief smile. "I will give the three of you time to prepare. Lappy will once again, serve as your transport. The rest of us will see you there soon, and one more thing Seth..."

"What?"

"If either Thalia or Phoebe happens to be rendered incapable, you will not continue the task without
them." Artemis said sternly. "I will not have that last episode repeated. Do you understand?"

I lowered my head slightly. Did she really need to rub that in? "Yes. It won't happen again."

I felt Artemis' stare linger on me a bit longer before addressing the hunters to disperse. I immediately went to my tent to prepare. My personal weapons were still back at Walt's place, so I was still stuck with the celestial silver weapons Artemis provided for me. Knowing what I was facing next, I decided not to take the guns with me this time. I doubt the small bullets would work well with a multi-headed dragon. As for my choice of apparel, I still wore the same sleeveless shirt I was wearing yesterday. I changed into comfortable jeans and sneakers, along with elbow-length archery gloves. Since my Navy jacket got destroyed yesterday, Artemis had placed a silver, white fur lined vest on my bed.

I took a glance at the vest and scoffed. I was not wearing that thing. The color alone made the wearer stand out like a light bulb. I didn't understand why Artemis would choose that color theme for her hunters to wear. Didn't they scorn attention and value stealth?

I stepped out of my tent and met the two hunters standing beside Lappy. When we were all settled in, Lappy took off in a dash, and we were soon on our way. Lappy stopped to drop us off by the Bell Harbor Marina before leaving. Right by the boardwalk, I noticed a new building with lights streaming from the windows. After a few moments, my dyslexic mind read the glowing words: *Monster Donut*. We walked towards it.

"So here's one," Thalia said. Each of us stood in front of the entrance, a few civilians rode passed us on bikes. "The monster can't be far."

"Alright," I started, my eyes analyzing the place. "Judging from these cracks on the crevices, it shows signs of poison and recent activity. The monster may have just left. What do you think, Phoebe?"

"I agree," Phoebe stated. "We'll have to draw it out. Let the monster come to us."

"That's easy," I commented. "With our combined scent, I wouldn't be surprised if-! Wait, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Thalia asked.

Phoebe nodded, summoning her bow. "I hear it too..." She took a few steps away from me, focusing on something coming behind me. "...and now I see it!"

Thalia and I ducked our heads as Phoebe released three arrows towards the incoming hydra, a six-headed monstrosity that stood at least 10 feet tall, its heads aligned with spikes, and its teeth dripping with acid. The arrows pierced the base of its necks, causing some of the heads to spit toxic poison at us. The three of us scrambled to dodge it. I summoned my bow and aimed at its eyes. Out of the three arrows I can now summon at once, only one hit its mark as one head swerved to avoid it, while another wailed in pain.

The civilians present were running around in panic, one of them even took pictures. The hydra moved its heads down to bite us before Thalia attacked with her Aegis from behind. The hydra simply whacked Thalia out of the way with its tail, causing her to stumble.

Thalia cursed in Greek before getting up quickly. Phoebe continued her onslaught of arrows while I tried to find a good angle to hit. I leaped up a nearby bench, about to shoot when I heard something coming out of the water. I turned and was staring straight into the eyes of the hydra. I jumped out of
the way as the head snapped down, the bench completely broken into splinters.

The second hydra continued to chase after me, splashing water all over the boardwalk. I noticed Thalia up ahead. She and Phoebe were still handling the first one. Noticing Thalia's spear, I thought up an idea.

"Thalia!" I shouted. "Take this one out first!"

"What did you say?!" she yelled back as she rolled out of the way while the hydra spurted out flames. Half of the boardwalk was now aflame.

"I said take this one first!" I repeated. "Use your abilities!"

She looked at the hydra behind me, and she instantly understood. With a hand, she manipulated the wind around her and forcibly pushed the hydra back, with Phoebe still attacking the hydra with her numerous arrows. Their combined attacks caused the hydra to stumble into the stores. She moved her Aegis into position and sent a blast of lightning as I moved out of the way.

Hydra number two got the brute force of the attack. The lightning strike caused the beast to roar in agony as it thrashed about before limping to the side. Remembering Artemis' conditions, I charged forward, summoning both knives in hand and stabbed the monster in the back. The body stilled as it started to glow, dispersing into gold dust.

Artemis said I needed to give the finishing blow, I recalled. She never said I had to beat it thoroughly.

Now all that's left was this fellow.

It wouldn't be possible to finish this hydra off like the other one since it wasn't drenched in water already. Cutting its heads off was definitely not an option, and both Phoebe and Thalia were starting to wear out. The whole Marina was going to go up in flames at this rate. The best option would be a one hit kill, and in order to do that …

"Phoebe, Thalia, can you girls keep the heads occupied?" I yelled amidst the noise.

Phoebe hesitated before answering. She was now perched on top of the store roof. How she managed to climb up there was anyone's guess. "I can manage three of them at once."

"I can take care of the other half," Thalia spoke up. "What's your plan?"

I summoned a silver knife. The thing looked so weak against such a huge monster. "I'm going to aim at its heart! We'll take this thing down that way. You girls ready?"

Phoebe nodded quickly, while Thalia agreed. "Go for it!"

I clenched my jaw as I ran forward, knife in hand. The hydra noticed my approach, but there was a flash of gold light, blinding the beast temporarily. Thalia took that moment to climb up the beast's back, distracting some of its heads. I continued running, leaping up to avoid its claws and soon, my knife pierced flesh.

The hydra immediately let out a cry, and its body moved violently. I tried to yank out my knife, but it wouldn't budge. My hand was stuck inside, and the body wasn't disappearing, which meant my attack was too shallow.

"SETH!" I heard Thalia scream. I looked up, and dodged most of the acid attack before Thalia
managed to knock it out. I held in my scream as I felt my skin burn from the contact.

I forced my hand out, my fingers still clasped around the handle, and pushed my body weight forward…

Then, the weirdest thing happened.

I thrust my knife forward, praying that I could reach the heart. I felt this strange energy coming off of me and into the weapon. The knife I had in hand gave off a silvery glow, and if my eyes weren't deceiving me, the knife lengthened as I struck the beast again.

This time, the attack was fatal. The hydra gave a wail before falling backward. Thalia rushed out of the way as the 10 foot monstrosity slammed against the wooden floor and into the water, creating a splash large enough to push the boats onto land.

I breathed heavily, just realizing how tired I was. Thalia and Phoebe joined me soon after.

Phoebe eyed me in confusion. "That weapon…how…?"

I looked equally confused before looking down at my hand. I widened my eyes in surprise. The knife that I had held earlier had transformed into a sword. The handle and thickness was still the same design, only the blade now had a longer reach.

"Did you do that?" Thalia asked quietly, eying my sword with interest.

I shook my head slowly. "I don't know. I was hoping to pierce its heart…maybe the weapon modified itself to suit my needs?"

"That's not possible," Phoebe said. "Lady Artemis granted all of us with the same, standard knives. To be able to alter the weapons at will is unheard of."

"I agree," a familiar voice interrupted. I rolled my eyes as I turned to face her. She must have lowered her aura since I didn't sense her at all. The rest of the hunters, along with Reeve and Coach Hedge soon appeared.

"Lady Artemis," Thalia said, giving a slight bow. "We've completed the task."

"I know," Artemis said, still looking at me with those unnerving eyes. "I was watching."

"Not bad, Hunter!" Coach Hedge exclaimed. "Taught that monster a thing or two for messing with you! I should have volunteered if I knew you be having this much fun!"

I gave a weary smile. I didn't think I'd ever comprehend the satyr's definition of 'fun'. "Thanks, Coach."

Artemis ordered. "The rest of us will destroy any Monster Donuts and hydas we find. Thalia, Phoebe, once you both are healed, be sure to join your sisters in scouting the area. As for you, Seth…"

"I can help!" I interrupted. Artemis gave a frown. "It was Thalia and Phoebe who did most of the work. If they are allowed to help, I should too."

"You've done enough," Artemis said, and she continued before I could protest. "Don't forget that you still have one last condition to fulfill. This task is meant for my hunters, and for my hunters alone."
"But-!"

"I also remember you promised to follow every order I give you without complaint," she added. I felt my shoulders slacken. "Are you going against that promise?"

"No," I said through clenched teeth. Artemis won this round, and she knew it.

"Good," Artemis said. "As for the task you just completed, you did well. I never thought you would unlock that ability this early."

"What ability?"

"You have an affinity with celestial silver, Seth," Artemis answered. "Given that you are made from the same substance, Hephaestus had given an earlier conjecture about this possible manipulation you might have."

"So you knew I had it?" I asked.

She appeared thoughtful. "I had my doubts, but now that Hephaestus' conjecture is confirmed… I must ask that you don't use it until I explain it more thoroughly to you. For now, just listen to my orders for once and go to your tent. I'll send Phoebe to tend to you later. She's our best healer."

"But I don't need…" I trailed off when Artemis gave me a warning look. "Fine."

-o-

After an hour or so, Phoebe finally finished tending to me. The campsite was mostly vacant. Only two hunters remained behind to stand guard, and Phoebe was going to return to the Marina soon. She slapped a bandage on my arm roughly, causing me to wince.

"Are you okay now?" she stated.

I nodded. "Yeah, I feel great actually. No wonder Artemis told me you're her best healer." Then, I remembered the golden light I saw, and the way her shots are so accurate...

I asked curiously. "Are you a daughter of Apollo?"

Phoebe stiffened. "Yes, but don't mention that fact again."

"You have something against him?" I said slowly. Phoebe threw me a glare. "It's fine if you don't want to tell me! I'm just trying to know you better."

"You want to know me better?" Phoebe said incredulously. I nodded.

"I don't know much about you, or any of the hunters other than Thalia, and that's because she's my friend." I told her. "One of your sisters gave me advice on how to change that, and well, this is me taking a step forward."

"You're a strange one," Phoebe muttered.

"I am strange."

She sighed. "I don't like remembering who my father is. You know how Apollo is like. He just does whatever suits him, and he doesn't even keep track of how many children he's having, or how many broken-hearted women he leaves behind. I know there are ancient laws to follow, but does it hurt to pay a visit or send a little memo to show that he cares?"
"Is he the reason why you joined the hunters?"

"Partially," Phoebe admitted. "He and the rest of the male gods are like that. They're the kind of men I despise the most. If there's one good thing about having him as my father, it's his relation with Lady Artemis. Through him, I am also closely related to my Lady, and that's good enough on his part."

I didn't say anything back, mostly because I didn't know what to say. Phoebe soon departed and left me alone.

I stayed in my tent the rest of the day. The injuries I sustained from the fight had all disappeared quickly. I didn't know what Artemis had in mind for the last condition, but I knew for sure that it was going to be even more difficult. I felt like she was lenient with this second task since she allowed Thalia and Phoebe to help me. There were just so many possibilities of what this third task could be. When Artemis and the rest of the Hunters arrived, I asked if I could borrow some mythology books to freshen up my memory, just in case. Artemis was more than willing to lend me some.

By tomorrow afternoon, Thalia came to inform me that the third condition was ready, and Artemis was meeting me at the far edge of the woods.

"Did she say to bring anything?" I asked Thalia.

She shook her head. "No, but I'm also going with you."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Thalia said. "She didn't tell me. Come on, you're going to be late."

Thalia and I left the campsite and went deeper into the forest. After some walking, I saw Artemis standing in the middle of a clearing.

"You finally arrived," she said without turning around. "This is the place for your last task. If you fulfill it, you won't have any arguments from me to carry on what you wish to do."

I looked around, noticing nothing special about this place. I didn't see any monsters. I was confused.

"What is the third task?" I asked.

Artemis faced Thalia and me with a smile. "You will be having a match."

A match… Oh, I see, that's why Thalia was here.

"Let me guess," I started. "You want me to fight against Thalia?"

"No," she said, surprising me. "You are not fighting Thalia."

"Then who…?"

Artemis smirked. "You will be facing me."

-o-

Chapter End Notes
* It is strongly hinted that Phoebe is a daughter of Apollo, though Rick Riordan never confirmed it. In the books, she is considered the hunter's best tracker and healer, an ability that comes from Apollo.
Match

You will be facing me.

My mind became blank.

I could only imagine the utter disbelief that was showing quite visibly on my face right now. I was so caught off guard that I didn't have the ability to mask it. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, and closed my eyes to process those words a second time. I felt my body freeze up, despite the turmoil of emotions inside me.

You should have known Artemis wouldn't play fair, that familiar inner voice said crudely. Do you really think she would let you do what you want? Follow your rules? How very naïve you are.

Shut up, I hissed back.

You know I'm right, Seth, that voice taunted. Now look at the mess you're in. I do wonder how you're going to get out of it.

I'll find a way, I thought back. I always do.

Until now maybe, the voice retorted, before rescinding back into the recesses of my mind.

Thalia spoke up first. "This isn't fair!"

Artemis didn't break her eye contact with me as she answered. "It is perfectly fair, Thalia Grace. Seth told me that my conditions have to be 'humanly possible' and it is possible (although rare) for a demigod to best a deity in a match. This condition is within our agreement."

Unfortunately, Artemis was right. I had witnessed first-hand of how Percy had defeated Ares fair and square. Although Ares was significantly stronger, Percy had his own advantages that even the score, and allowed him to beat a god at only twelve years old. But what Percy had in his favor, I didn't have any. Artemis wasn't arrogant like Ares was, so she wouldn't be blinded by goading. My surroundings didn't give me an edge like Percy's did. I wasn't a Big Three kid like Percy or Hercules or any of those big-shot demigods that defeated Olympians in the myths. I wasn't smart like Annabeth, who could defeat bigger, stronger enemies with only her words and dagger. All I had was something given to me, and my opponent was the one who gave me them in the first place.

The odds were very much in my favor, and it was all because of the poor, thoughtless limitations I set up! The fact that Artemis decided to pick it apart and use them to her benefit didn't surprise me. She-like anyone else- wanted things to go her way. She was lenient with the first two tasks because she knew she had me on the third. I should have suspected that I was being cheated ever since Artemis allowed Thalia and Phoebe to aid me.

You were a fool, my inner voice acknowledged. It happens.

Yeah, and now I'm paying for it.

My voice was strained. "What is Thalia here for?"

"Thalia is here to serve as our witness," Artemis said. "As my lieutenant, she will be the one overseeing this match."
So Artemis was using Thalia as proof of my upcoming humiliation.

"What…what are the rules?" I asked slowly, trying to keep my tone steady. I kept my gaze down, not wanting Artemis to guess what I was thinking. That is, if she kept her promise of not looking into my mind.

"The rules are simple," she said. "We continue this match until one of us forfeits. Use whatever weapons you need at your disposal. Do you accept these conditions?"

I swallowed heavily before facing her, my countenance a visor of calmness. "I accept your terms."

Thalia stared at me in bewilderment. "Seth, this is Artemis we're talking about! She's not going to go easy on you-!"

"-And I don't expect her to," I interrupted. "In fact, I don't ever want her going easy on me. That would be an insult."

"I wasn't planning to," Artemis said narrowly. "Are you ready?"

I stared at her a moment longer before walking past Thalia, standing a few meters in front of Artemis. I closed my eyes once more, focusing before materializing the knives. I raised both hands up in offense, my feet spread apart.

"I'm ready," I stated.

"Thalia," Artemis called. "Would you do the honors?" She had both hands hanging loosely by her side, not bothering to summon any weapons of her own. For that I was glad, but at the same time wary by her confidence.

Thalia hesitated, her expression clearly nervous. She threw me a glance for confirmation, and I gave a nod, tightening the hold on my knives in anticipation.

"On my mark…" Thalia stated, raising an arm. "Get ready…" Her arm flashed downwards.

"Begin!"

At that very second, Artemis moved instantly to close the gap while I threw one of my knives on instinct. Artemis swerved her head to dodge the first attack while I threw my second knife at her. She raised a hand and caught the knife's handle between her fingers and threw it back at me.

I leaped backwards to avoid it while drawing distance, the knife just missing me by inches. Soon, we were locked in close combat. I was on the offensive, trying to throw in a punch or two, but failing. Artemis managed to either counter or twist her body nimbly like some Olympic gymnast. The goddess eventually turned the tables as she aimed a high kick. I was forced to fall back, knowing now that blocking any of her attacks still resulted in deep bruising. I crouched down as I summoned another knife. I stabbed it into the earth, my hand holding it tightly as I propelled my whole body to the side to attack. Artemis responded by leaping upwards, her body spiraling before standing firm on two feet.

I was already drawing my summoned celestial silver bow before she landed, three newly materialized arrows soaring towards her. Artemis narrowed her eyes before she finally summoned a pair of knives and sliced all three arrows in midair. I continued my onslaught, launching three arrows at a time while Artemis slashed them to bits. I slowly moved back during each attack, the foliage of the trees just a couple feet behind me. I sent in a final wave before retreating into the forest.
For a few precious moments, I tried to regain my strength by maneuvering between the trees. Artemis was already hot on my trail, and I could hear the sound of my own heart beating fast. After summoning so many arrows and the knives back and forth, the toll was catching up to me. I quickly climbed up a tree, toned down my aura, and sat there briefly to plan. I could hear the tumultuous sound of branches and trees snapping as Artemis hunted for me. At most, I only had a minute before she found me.

If I was to somehow beat Artemis, strength was not the answer. The difference between us was so vast it's laughable. Only tactics and careful planning could give me an edge, and the element of surprise that I didn't have. From what I knew of Artemis, she was very prideful. Not arrogant like Ares, but more like Athena in a sense. Artemis was confident: she firmly believed she's got the upper hand. She probably thought this fight was a joke, which explained why she didn't immediately summon her weapons.

I felt her vibrant aura, and quickly moved on. I was jumping from branch to branch before stumbling onto the forest terrain, my body starting to wear out. My hearing caught the *swoosh* of a knife, and I swerved my head- the knife leaving a small cut on my cheek before embedding itself on a tree trunk. Behind me, I heard Artemis notching her own silver bow, and I quickly ran in zigzag formation, using the trees for cover. One of the arrows nearly hit me in the shoulder as I slammed my back against the tree for protection.

"You should give up, Seth," Artemis called out. "We both know who is going to be the victor. You cannot win. You are only prolonging your defeat."

I didn't answer her, my breathing shallow and uneven. Judging by her voice's projection, Artemis was only standing a few feet away.

"This fight is pointless, and you know it," Artemis continued. I hitched a breath. She was getting closer to my hiding spot. "No matter how much progress you've made thus far, you cannot hope to match an Olympian. If you surrender now, I promise to take you back to Forger and not leave you in permanent confinement. If you do not, anything that happens after will be of your own consequence."

I gritted my teeth at her words. A tempting deal, but she never said she would absolve my oath of not joining the Titans. I summoned the knives back in my hand. The moment I did so, Artemis suddenly pinpointed my location, and shot numerous arrows to where I was a moment ago. A large amount of dust and smoke appeared as the tree snapped and fell to the ground. Out of the smoke, silver blurs of light came forth, and with a burst of adrenaline, I quickly slashed the arrows with my knives. When the smoke cleared, Artemis was nowhere in sight.

I darted my eyes nervously, scanning everything while holding my knives in defensive position. I felt a breeze brush past my face, giving away my opponent.

I turned to see Artemis coming at me from above, her knives out. I moved my weapons up to defend, but I misjudged her. Instead of the knives I expected her to use, Artemis used them only as a diversion in order to land a very harsh kick to my stomach. I gave a silent scream, feeling some of my ribs crack as my whole body soared backwards by several feet, slamming hard against another tree. My knives vanished due to my lack of concentration, my mind blinded by the burst of pain.

Artemis didn't give me a second to recover as she quickly teleported in front of me and aimed another kick to my side. I slammed against the ground, struggling to breathe. My hand dug into the ground, and as Artemis approached me once more, I threw the dirt against her face.

She stumbled back, crying out as she tried to blink the dirt out of her eyes. I felt like my body had
turned to lead as I dragged myself up with difficulty. I choked violently, spitting out blood. The world around me became unfocused, my eyes struggled to stay open, and my legs couldn't seem to function. Regardless, I summoned a knife and charged.

Even without her eyes, Artemis still managed to block my sloppy attack. Using her free hand, she held onto my shoulder tightly and tripped me, slamming my back against the earth. I cried out, my mouth welling up with blood, and I most definitely got a concussion. I felt Artemis' hand clasp around my throat, her watery silver eyes staring at me with cold menace.

"Give up!" she hissed, tightening her hand around my neck. "Surrender!"

In my situation, most people would have given in to her demands. I wasn't like most people. I knew that if I gave in, I would be forced to forfeit my future plans, and I would be locked up for as long as Artemis willed it. My freedom would be gone, and that was a price I would never pay. So despite how much my mind and body were screaming at me to submit, I forcefully kept my mouth closed.

This seemed to infuriate Artemis even more, and with her other hand, she twisted my left arm. I screamed, finally unable to mask my agony as I feebly tried to wrench her arm off me. Artemis was red in the face; for once her expression of anger clearly seen.

"WHY WON'T YOU YIELD?!" she screeched. "DO YOU WANT TO DIE?!"

I let out a raspy gasp, trying to give an answer. Artemis loosened her grip over my bruised throat.

"I…I d-don't want to die," I finally said, "b-but I…I won't ever submit to you!"

Artemis appeared stunned for a moment, letting out an inaudible gasp. Then, her eyes hardened.

"Then I will force it out of you!" she yelled. With a single hand, she picked my whole body up and slammed me against another tree. The pain was so immense that I couldn't even lift a finger. I sat there like some old stuffed toy as Artemis walked towards me like a predator stalking its prey.

"What must I do…to get you to give up?!" she said more to herself than to me. She clenched her hands into my shirt, forcing me to look at her. "WHY MUST YOU MAKE THINGS SO DIFFICULT?! WHY?! ANSWER ME!"

I looked at her with lidded eyes, and noticed the sheer desperation apparent in hers. Right then, I realized why Artemis was trying so hard to change my mind. It was because of the rules of this match. No matter how beaten up I was, as long as I didn't forfeit, I could still win, and Artemis wanted to change that.

I gave a simple answer. "It's my own decision."

I didn't hear or see Artemis' response because right after I said those four words…

I blacked out.

-o-

I didn't know how long I remained unconscious. When I 'opened' my eyes, I noticed that I was sitting on a chair. The chair was kind of fancy, like the kind you would see in an 18th century house. The wood was dark and smooth, and my back rested against a velvet cushion comfortably. The place was very dark. I couldn't even differentiate the walls or the floor despite my night vision. It was like I was sitting in the middle of a void.
I figured that this was a place I subconsciously constructed in my mind. I noticed that my injuries were nonexistent, and I was wearing a white dress shirt with a black tie, and dress pants. My feet, however, were bare and the ground was cold to the touch.

"You finally came to huh? I was wondering when you will show up." a voice said, breaking the silence. I turned my head slightly to the right. My eyes landed on…myself. Somehow, I didn't find it strange that there was another me in here.

"Yeah," I muttered. "You can say I got banged up a lot."

The other me gave a chuckle. "It's Artemis. What did you expect?"

"True," I agreed. "Where am I?"

He (me) shrugged. "Depends on what name we give it. We made it. You can say it's…a sort of mental rehabilitation. Our body is right now undergoing intense healing."

"Oh," I replied, thinking. The other me walked over and knelt in front of me.

"So what are we going to do next, Seth?" he asked. "Our fight against Artemis is over. We don't know who the winner is."

"Well," I started, "if we won, Artemis would have to take us back. If we lost…"

"If we lost…?"

"We won't be making things easy for Artemis, that's for sure." I said, smirking. The other me gave a smile.

"Good idea," he said. "For now. But first…how about waking up?"

With a jolt, I suddenly opened my eyes.

The pain came crashing back in, and I struggled to adjust my eyes to the light. My left arm was in a cast, and I felt bandages covering my neck, forehead, and chest. There was a bowl of ambrosia beside me, and I slowly propped myself up with my good hand. I reached for the spoon offered and swallowed. I coughed, my chest hurting as I felt the ambrosia go down my throat with difficulty. Due to constant impact, my advanced healing wasn't able to catch up until now. I could tell that my broken ribs were mending, and I could move my left fingers easily.

I heard someone come in through the tent. It was Thalia, and noticing that I was up, she rushed over to my side.

"You're finally awake," she breathed. "Artemis and I were so worried."

I narrowed my eyes in confusion. "How long was I out?"

"Two days."

"No wonder," I mumbled. I noticed the inside of the tent was different from mine. "Whose tent am I in?"

Thalia hesitated. "It's Artemis' tent."

I paused for a moment to absorb the info. "D-did she…?" I directed my eyes at my cast before gazing at Thalia. She nodded.
"What did she do to you?" she asked. "You went into that forest, and came out nearly dead in Artemis' arms. I almost accused Artemis of killing you."

I winced. "It definitely came close to that. Anyway, Thalia. You are the judge. Who won the match?"

"I can't say," she said.

"What do you mean 'you can't say'?" I said incredulously. "It's either I won or I lost. If you're afraid of hurting my feelings-!"

Thalia interrupted. 'I'm not in charge of the match, Seth. When I said 'I can't say', it means exactly that. I oversaw the match, but I am not in charge. That would be Artemis."

I cursed, clenching my right hand into a tight fist. I was afraid Thalia would say that.

"If it means anything," Thalia began. "Artemis did appear very distressed afterwards. She wouldn't be acting like that if she won, right?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's always hard to tell with Artemis. Where is she by the way?"

"She's out hunting I think," she told me. "She will be back soon."

A plan quickly developed after that realization. If Artemis wasn't here, then no one would stop me if I left right?

"Don't even think about it," Thalia said, looking at me with narrowed eyes. "You're not even done healing! You can't go out by yourself-!"

"Watch me," I retorted. I lifted the covers and forced my legs to the side. As I struggled to get up, Thalia promptly pushed me back down. "Thalia!"

"I told you to stay put!" she said sternly. "Artemis told me to watch over you-!"

"I don't need a babysitter!" I shouted. "Do you even know what she intends to do to me?!!"

"I got some ideas," Thalia snapped. "One of them involves making sure you don't get your ass whooped, again."

I crossed my arms- or at least tried to- defiantly. "So you don't know what's going on."

"I know enough," Thalia said. I rolled my eyes.

"Enlighten me."

"Your plan is to become Camp Half-Blood's spy," Thalia answered. My smirk disappeared. "You think you can do a good job at it, and there is this prophecy going on about that. Whatever it is, Artemis strongly disagrees. Am I right?"

"So you do know," I said accusingly, narrowing my eyes. My tone became hushed. "Yet you still stop me."

"I'm stopping you from going on a reckless escapade," she reiterated. She moved to sit down next to me. "I don't know what your prophecy is or what it's demanding...but forced or not, I think it's very brave of you to choose this role. It takes a lot of guts to accept this sort of thing."
I frowned. "I'm not brave, Thalia. I figured that accepting my prophecy would be better than going against it- the sooner it's over, the better."

"I know what you mean," she mumbled. "This war has been dragging on for too long. I wish it would just end. So if you think you can put a stop to all this, I'm all for it."

"Y-you support me?" I said in surprise.

She nodded. "I think it's a good idea. We need all the help and resources we can get. A spy will definitely get our side that and more. Artemis knows this too, but she just…doesn't want that person to be you."

I scoffed. "Because she thinks I'll stink at it?" Thalia stared at me in disbelief.

"No, Seth, that's not it! Gods, you can be so dense!" she exclaimed. "She doesn't want you to get hurt because you are her first and only kid. Just from being around her, I can tell Artemis is different from the other Olympians. She genuinely cares about your well being. I envy you for having Artemis as a mom."

"Well, in case you didn't notice," I said sarcastically, lifting my left arm up. "I've been hurt plenty by her. She's probably going to lock me up again permanently this time, once she comes back. Regardless of your opinion, I don't plan on sitting here waiting for her to do just that. If you really support me Thalia, you should be helping me!"

"Even if I do, do you really think you can make it in that condition?" she pointed out. "I heard that this place you're staying at is really far. Imagine how many monsters you will encounter! Artemis is the goddess of the hunt. She will track you down easily."

"I suppose," I muttered aloud, but inwardly, I gave a scoff. You have no idea how much you underestimate me, Thalia. I may not be as strong as you, but I've got other means.

I rubbed the black tattoo on my right wrist softly. I wondered if Artemis saw it while she fixed me up, but it didn't matter. Seeing that gave me some reassurance of help, but I wasn't going to call Nemesis just yet. Her services wouldn't be cheap, so I was saving her as a last resort. Instead, I muttered a silent prayer to Apollo to alert him of a meeting point outside the camp. Now that Artemis was absent, my prayer should reach Apollo instantly. I could only hope he showed up on time.

Thalia appeared satisfied with my answer. "Just rest up, Seth. I'm sure you got nothing to worry about. Artemis will be reasonable about this, I'm sure of it."

"Whatever you say," I mumbled. I wish I had your confidence.

She gave me a quick smile before excusing herself out of Artemis' tent. Once I knew for sure that Thalia wouldn't be coming back in, I glanced down at the cast around my left arm and promptly tore it off. My left arm had healed completely in the last five minutes. I threw the annoying appendage out of the way, and used both hands to unwrap the bindings off my forehead and neck, revealing unblemished skin. I still left the bindings on my chest though. There was still bruising present.

I finally got off the bed, walking back and forth to test my joints. I poked my head outside the tent, not many hunters were out. Some of them were inside their own tent, or maybe went hunting with Artemis. Reeve and Coach Hedge were also inside their own tent. I focused on Thalia's aura, and I sensed that she was in the forest, gathering wood for the fire or something.
I quickly packed up my things, stuffed them into a duffle bag, and swung it over my shoulder. I walked out with careful steps, making sure not even a twig was disturbed. As I neared the outer perimeters of the camp site, I noticed Lappy.

_Oh shit_, I cursed. Lappy was currently in bloodhound mode, fast asleep. The huge canine was giving off large exhales. Artemis must have given Lappy guard duty.

With a hushed breath, I slowly made my way around the bloodhound. I stopped dead in my tracks when Lappy gave a snort and adjusted his paws, but remained asleep. His nose was pointed straight at me. I sincerely prayed that my scent wouldn't wake him up. Eventually, after another couple of slow, quiet steps, I got passed Lappy, and when I was at least five meters away, I took off in a dash.

Thalia was so going to get my hide for this.

After minutes of running, I finally stopped at the rendezvous point. Apollo has yet to show up, and his absence got me nervous. There was a natural creek to my left, and I lowered my bag and sat down. I dipped my hands into the clear water and splashed it against my face. I heard the sound of leaves moving behind me, and I instantly had a bow in my hands.

My arrow pointed towards a dryad.

I widened my eyes in surprise. There were dryads around here too? The nymph looked similar to the ones I’ve seen at Camp Half-Blood. She looked to be around my age. Her skin was tinted light green, and she had wavy greenish-brown hair. Her gown consisted of dried leaves and flowers. She quickly hid behind a maple tree when she noticed my bow. I lowered my weapon, apologetic.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said gently. "You only startled me. It's a bad habit of mine." She poked her head back out timidly. I gave a smile. "You can come out. See?" I willed my weapon to vanish. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The dryad, seeing my weapon gone, slowly came out. As she approached, my eyes noticed the strain she was putting on her right leg. Her left foot had a gash, and I somehow knew she had that injury for at least a day. When she sat down next to me, I gestured to her foot.

"How did you get that wound?" I inquired.

The dryad blushed. "I…I wasn't looking where I was going. Some mortals had set some traps."

"I see," I said. "Do you mind if I look at that? I might be able to treat it." The dryad nodded.

I examined the long 3 inch tear, the blood already dried. The wound wasn't too deep, but it had hit some vital veins, and there were traces of dirt. I'd need to wash that out first, and then maybe wrapped it with the spare bandages I had taken from Artemis' tent.

I ripped a piece of my shirt, and soaked it into the water. The nymph adjusted her foot forward at my urging and I pressed the wet rag onto it. The dryad gave a wince, and I lessened the force of the touch. Once all the visible dirt was wiped clean, I took out the spare bandages and wrapped it around tightly. It wasn't perfect due to the lack of materials, but it should help her heal faster.

"There you go," I said. "Now try standing up."

She did so, and this time, she was able to stand up more properly.

"Does it feel better?" I asked. She nodded, giving a small smile. "That's good. Just make sure you take them off after a day or two. Given your rate of recovery, the tear will fade by then."
"Thank you," she said, and then she proceeded to give me a hug and quick peck on the cheek. Before I could say anything, she giggled and soon vanished into the forest depths.

Despite the awkwardness I was feeling after such close contact, I actually felt a sense of accomplishment. I've never tried treating someone else before, and the experience felt very nice. I was starting to understand why Will insisted on being a healer when he had the capability of a skilled fighter.

There was a burst of golden light, and I knew instantly that Apollo had arrived.

"Hey there, nephew!" he exclaimed. "How have you been?"

"I'm alright, Lord Apollo," I said, bowing. I swung the bag back onto my shoulder. "Thank you for coming so quickly despite your busy schedule." Apollo waved it off.

"I told you to call me anytime, Seth," he grinned. "So what do you need me for huh?"

"Could you take me back to Walt Forger?" I asked. "I've over stayed my welcome here."

Apollo smirked. "About time. I hope my sister and those gorgeous hunters of hers haven't been bullying you."

"They've been...hospitable actually," I said carefully. "I didn't encounter too many troubles with them."

Apollo was surprised. "Really? Not bad, nephew! You actually wormed your way in!"

"It's not like that," I protested. The sun god only laughed.

"Sure, Seth," he replied as he lifted a hand towards me. "Make sure you close your eyes."

I nodded, grabbing his offered hand as we both vanished.

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I gave Walt a call once Apollo and I arrived at Wilmington, Massachusetts. After Apollo disappeared, I made a mental note to offer him a sacrifice as thanks. Even if Apollo was very easy going around me, I couldn't forget how he had threatened me before, and I made it my mission to stay on his good side at all times.

Lynetta came by in her Prius to pick me up. On the way back, she asked me all kinds of questions of what I did during my second stay with Artemis and her hunters, and I answered each one willingly. The Tudor house came into view, and I felt a wave of nostalgia. I suddenly realized how much I missed being here.

Walt had got the entrance door replaced with a solid imperial gold one. I held back my laughter from the vast contrast between the door and the rest of the house. Lynetta also gave a hint of amusement when she saw my reaction, and simply told me it was one of 'Mr. Forger's paranoid tendencies.'

When Lynetta and I came through the door, I was met with barking noises. My heart nearly stopped as I saw Lappy walking towards me in beagle form, with his mistress right behind him. She and Walt put an end to their conversation when they saw me.

"Hunter," Walt started. "Lady Artemis has just been telling me some interesting stories and deals you made."
"Indeed," Artemis said, her eyes narrowing. I felt like there was a lump in my throat. "Do you think you can escape from my notice? I'm very disappointed in you.

"I...I'm not going back," I finally said. My whole body was slightly trembling with fear. "I won't go back with you! Apollo already knows-!"

"So you called my brother to help you when I was away," Artemis interrupted. "How cunning of you, Seth Hunter. I see that you have fooled Thalia into thinking you were too injured to escape. My lieutenant didn't even notice anything amidst when I got back, and I supposed you successfully snuck past Lappy?"

I didn't answer. I felt my face paling as each second past.

"I never took you for a coward, Seth," Artemis scolded. "I would have thought you at least talk to me once you woke up. If you did, you would have known that I'm not here to take you back." I widened my eyes. "Perhaps I was wrong."

"You're not here to..." Artemis shook her head.

"I'm here to tell you that you won," she said. "Even though I beaten you physically, your resolve over your decision did not break. You never once called out surrender no matter how many times I tried convincing you, forcing you. I realized that I've been...aiming to control your life when it wasn't my right to."

"Oh," I said, looking down at the ground. Now I felt embarrassed of my earlier assumptions. I noticed Artemis walking towards me, and when I looked up, her hand reached towards me, but I involuntarily stepped back to avoid it.

Artemis placed her hand back down. "Before I go, there is one more requirement I need from you."

"What kind of requirement?" I asked warily.

Artemis knelt down, and Lappy scrambled into her arms. She lifted Lappy up towards me. "I want you to take Lappy. He will be beside you when I cannot."

Lady Artemis? The beagle looked at her, cocking his head.

"You are to watch over Seth, Lappy. Can you do that for me?" Artemis asked.

The beagle gave a nod. I will do my best.

"Will you accept him, Seth?" she said.

"O-of course," I stammered, slightly caught off guard of the request. I never expected to have Lappy with me. I thought Artemis would need him more. I took the beagle from Artemis, petting him.

Artemis was pleased. "This concludes my visit. Make sure you continue to practice your celestial silver manipulation, Seth. Start with small modifications like what you did earlier for now, and then work your way up from that. The silver is attuned to your thoughts and the amount of energy you possess. Every alteration you make-no matter how small- would take away double the standard energy required. I already informed Walt Forger of the details, and he will train you on this aspect."

"Yes..." I muttered. "I'll be sure to remember what you said."

"Also," Artemis added softly. "Please let Chiron know what it is you plan to do. I want you to let at
least one person from Camp Half-Blood to be in on this."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," I murmured. It was what I planned to do anyway.

Artemis gave a curt nod as she walked past me and Lynetta, who has been watching silently. "Farewell."

Silver light emerged, and when the light died, Artemis was nowhere to be seen.

-o-
Phase Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I was standing in the middle of a forest. There was greenery everywhere, the aroma of fresh vegetation and flowers was overwhelming, and I heard the sound of water splashing gently against rock. I wandered about this place I knew was a dream. As I approached a small waterfall, a white doe walked towards me, and I lifted a hand to pet it gently on the head, its snout nuzzling against my touch.

I walked beside the gentle creature, looking around me with a sense of tranquility. This forest was beautiful, so natural and breathtaking. It’s a shame one can no longer see such places in most parts of the world. I sat down at the foot of a Grand Oak. Its branches seemed to stretch on forever.

I heard someone else approach. I looked up, and instantly recognized the blonde visitor. I tilted my head down slightly to display my respect. The doe beside me wandered off.

"I was wondering how I managed to enter into a dream," I mumbled as I stood up. "Do you need me for something, Lady Athena?"

Athena only smiled, her grey eyes amused. "How presumptuous of you, Seth Hunter. Can you not give me the benefit of the doubt? What makes you believe I need something from you? I could be here for a simple chat."

I gave her one of my signature smiles, the ones that were obviously fake and dripping with sarcasm.

"Why would you ask such a thing?" I inquired. "I would have thought the goddess of wisdom would cut to the chase and not waste time on idle banter."

"That is the assumption," Athena said. "It truly depends on the one asking. What you presume to be 'idle banter' may not be so for me."

I narrowed my eyes at her smirk. "What is your reason for contacting me?"

"Very well, Seth, since you insist." Athena gave a small sigh. Her countenance became firm and stoic; her eyes looked like they were piercing into my soul. "I need you to do me a favor. A favor only you are available for."

"Do I have a choice to do it or not?"

"No," Athena answered swiftly. I held back my protests, my face struggling slightly to appear neutral. "You heard about Camp Half-Blood's predicament already, correct?"

"What about it?"

"Then you must know that nearly all Greek demigods are currently too busy in recovering and rebuilding the Camp's defenses." Athena said pointedly.

I frowned. "Did they lose?"

"They did not," Athena said, "but the cost of winning was great. The Titan Army has made the first direct move, and now, I want you, my daughter, and Walt Forger to make the second." She caught
hold of my stunned gaze. "Yes, you heard me correctly. It's time my daughter and Walt Forger become active again."

I swallowed heavily at her ominous words. "What are you suggesting?"

"I've been keeping a watch on your progress here, Seth," Athena started. "You've certainly matured since the start of your private training. You've grown stronger, and your strength is the kind I need for this next phase to work."

"I've discovered a monster infested area located not far from where you are," Athena replied. "It is important that this hideout is destroyed, but you must also gather all information that is within it, and proceed from there."

"What kind of information am I expecting, Lady Athena?" I asked.

Athena only gave a knowing smile. "You will know when you see it." She stepped forward and whispered the address into my ear. When she finished, I was startled. Athena stepped back.

"Succeed on this request, and I promise you will be rewarded."

I suddenly woke up with a sloppy tongue licking my face.

Seth! Lappy cried. Wake up! Wake up! I'm hungry!

I groaned, blinking the weariness out of my eyes as I got up slowly, sweeping my messy hair out of the way. Lappy was wagging his tail impatiently, his head gently nudging against my chest, trying to hurry me up. I gave a lidded glance at the digital clock on my table. The glowing numbers reading 6:15 am.

"Not again, Lappy." I said, irritated. Even after months of Walt's training sessions, I was never a morning person. "Why must you eat so early?"

I'm hungry. Lappy repeated, as if that explained everything.

I rolled my eyes, sliding my feet to the side and got up, stretching. "I swear, Lappy, you eat at least 10 meals a day! You're going to end up being overweight with all that bacon!"

Like you are one to talk, Lappy growled. I raised an eyebrow at the beagle.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

How many pounds of whip cream have you consumed since I got here five days ago? Lappy questioned. I may not know much about what you mortals eat, but I heard whip cream was filled with these things you call 'calories' -

I threw the beagle a mock-glare. "Are you calling me fat?"

Lappy had a mischievous gleam in his eye. I've noticed you've gotten slightly pudgy around the waist and arms.

'This 'pudginess' is what one would call muscle!' I declared, smirking at the small beagle on the floor. "What about your feet Lappy? I noticed they've been drooping a lot lately."

'This 'droopiness' is what one would call age, Lappy mimicked. With age, comes wisdom. Something I'm afraid a little child like you wouldn't understand.
"Oh, you are so going to get it!" I said; lunging at Lappy before the beagle took off out of the door. I chased after the dog playfully down the staircase before the two of us reached the kitchen.

Walt, surprisingly, was already seated at one of the counter chairs with a newspaper spread open. He lifted an eyebrow when he noticed Lappy and I dashed in abruptly. As Lappy continued to dodge my attempts to catch him, I didn't notice Lynetta coming in through the entry way with a mug in her hand.

"Morning," She greeted. Walt gave a nod. I, on the other hand, continued to chase Lappy like an immature, carefree child until Lappy allowed himself to be swooped up by Lynetta.

"You're quite energetic today," Lynetta remarked. There was a suspicious gleam in her eye, and I knew deep down that I was in for some trouble. "I was going to let you off easy on the warm-ups but I guess adding in another 50 push-ups and 5 minute wall sits wouldn't hurt."

I gave a nervous laugh. "I-I don't think that's necessary Lynetta-!"

"It's settled," Lynetta announced, abruptly cutting me off. She walked out of the kitchen with Lappy still settled in her arms. "Come along, Seth. I haven't got all day."

"B-but I haven't eaten any-!"

"That's what brunch is for," Lynetta pointed out.

In the end, Lappy got his bacon while I got an empty stomach.

Needless to say, I glowered at the smug beagle for the rest of the day. With my stomach growling, I was not ashamed to admit that I imagined Lappy as a hot dog a couple times.

After the strenuous warm-ups were over, Lynetta and I continued the new tutoring session on espionage while Lappy sat back and listened. Now that I knew where I was heading, Lynetta decided to give me lessons on what I should or should not do in possible circumstances. We went over the kind of behavior I should display, how to choose possible allies within enemy territory, and most importantly, how I should present myself to the Titans. She also strongly suggested that I didn't reveal certain abilities.

I did not mention the dream I had about Athena. Not yet.

"Your celestial silver manipulation and weapons summoning are abilities you must not use in front of them," Lynetta warned. "Only if your life is at stake, then you should use it. By keeping it hidden, you will at least have the element of surprise and an advantage the enemy knows nothing about."

"I understand," I said. "Is there anything else I should put a restraint on?"

"It is already well known that you are an expert in archery, combat, and dual wielding, so you don't need to hide those skills," Lynetta began. "Your swordsmanship on the other hand, is also one I suggest you don't display too much of either. You can show that you've improved, but not by too much."

"Why not just hide my swordsmanship skill altogether?" I asked. "Let my enemy assume I am weak in that area?"

"It's because I don't want you to appear too lacking," Lynetta said. "While trying to make the enemy
underestimate you, you must also come across as impressive, especially towards the Titans. Titans love power when they see it, but only if it's a power that doesn't rival their own. If they see you as a threat, they will eliminate you without question."

"Like the gods, I thought morbidly, remembering how Thalia and Percy nearly met their end last winter."

"That shouldn't be a problem," I said. "My power is nowhere near a Titan's or an Olympian's for that matter."

"Perhaps," Lynetta rescinded. "But that case would be different if you were to work together with at least two other demigods. Titans may be strong, but they are not invincible."

"I see," I said, thoughtful. "What about the guns? Should I use them? It will be troublesome if those traitors decide to use them too."

"That's a good point," Lynetta muttered, "but I wouldn't worry about other demigods using them too much. Mortal weapons are often looked down on, and not many will be able to reach a high marksmanship level anyway. Just look at how long it took for you to shoot accurately, and you have your archery talent to help you with it."

"That's true," I replied. "How do you know so much about this stuff anyway?"

Lynetta stiffened. "I had…previous experience of going undercover in my past assignments. I've never encountered any Titans, but I deduced their way of thinking by the myths, assuming they remain old-fashioned."

I recalled my encounter with Atlas briefly. "Yeah, I think they still are."

"That's good news," Lynetta replied. "They're more predictable that way."

-o-

The rest of the day past by in a breeze. I still hesitated in bringing up my dream, and the new task Athena has ordered the three of us to partake in. I knew that delaying a goddess’ orders was nothing but bad news, but still I hesitated. What would Walt think about going out in the open again? I didn't think Lynetta would mind too much (it was her mom doing the ordering), but Walt? This new 'mission' might have been easier to discuss if I was doing it by myself. Now, I got to put in others' consideration too.

In the end, I disclosed my dream at dinner.

Walt grew still once I finished. Lynetta threw him a worried glance. I just sat there looking at my empty plate, not sure of what I could say.

Walt gave a sigh. "I just knew this day would come: the gods leaving me alone in peace? That's too good to be true." He scoffed, mumbling incoherent words under his breath.

"So what should we do?" I asked. "It's not just me Athena is asking for."

"We don't really have much of a choice," Walt replied, standing up. "Lady Athena is very selective in who she chooses. If she has picked us, then she must believe only we can do the job well. We best prepare immediately. I will search up the hideout's blueprints and security systems. Lynetta, make sure you prep Hunter on what he should do and wear. We'll set out first thing in the morning. The quicker this is over, the happier I'll be."
Lynetta nodded. "Yes, Mr. Forger."

Each of us got out of the dining room. After I washed the dishes, Lynetta went to get some things before she and I met up in my room. There was a bag in her hand. Lappy was already settled on my bed when the two of us came in. He must have noticed the solemn looks on our faces because he didn't say anything. He clambered into my lap as I sat down beside him.

"I'm assuming Walt already has a plan in mind?" I said.

She nodded. "This isn't the first time an Olympian has asked a favor like this. Basically, this task my mother asked us to do is the covert kind. This will be your first undercover assignment Seth."

"Yay," I muttered dryly. What a coincidence. We were just talking about espionage earlier.

"We will be going in with disguises." Lynetta said seriously. She took out what appears to be wigs, pairs of glasses, and formal apparel out of the bag. "You will wear this."

She handed me one of the glasses, and a dark-haired wig. I picked up the glasses and stared at it skeptically.

"Why do I need glasses?"

Lynetta gave a blank stare. "Your eyes are a dead giveaway. You may be able to erase your scent, but silver eyes are a rare trait. When you put those on, your eye color will appear as dark gray. Walt added in that specialty himself. Color lenses also work, but they're a hassle to put in, and I lost count of how many times I've had trouble with them."

"Oh," I mumbled. I tried on the glasses, and when I stared at the mirror stand by the door, I found out what Lynetta said was true. The boy in the mirror no longer had silver eyes. Everything in my vision appeared slightly darker though, even though the lens were transparent. I took off the glasses hastily.

"I also want to give you this," Lynetta said, handing me a very tiny black…listening device?

"When the two of us go through the front doors, Walt will be coming in from the back to set up explosives," Lynetta informed. "I will serve as a distraction, and you will make sure to gather as much information as you can. Once Walt is done, he will inform us through this device. You must also tell us when you are done or in trouble."

"Okay," I said.

"Make sure you put on the wig too, and wear casual clothes- nothing that stands out. I'm sure you have no problems with that with your poor fashion sense."

I snorted at her words. "Sure, Lynetta."

"Good," Lynetta said as she got up to leave. "If everything goes according to plan, we might have time to order carry out for lunch."

-A-

A T-Mobile store loomed over us as Lynetta and I walked through the automatic doors. A blast of air-conditioning hit me and I noticed a couple employees that were currently helping some mortals in their individual booths. I paid them little attention as I walked beside Lynetta to the main counter.
I was dressed in a simple white shirt and knee-length khaki shorts. I kept my demigod scent at a minimum, and I donned the black wig and glasses Lynetta told me to. To any other person, I appeared as a harmless mortal teen browsing through their selection of cell phones. I had a backpack slung over my shoulders.

As for Lynetta, she only tied her black hair in a bun and wore black-rimmed glasses, her appearance not much different than usual. She had on a gray blazer and blouse, along with a small white purse. Since Lynetta couldn't mask her demigod scent like I can, she had put on a lot of strong perfume to cover it.

The lady at the front desk noticed us. "How may I help you?"

Lynetta gave a smile. "My cousin Adrian here just decided to have a new cell phone to replace his broken one. Your company offered the best phone deal, so here we are."

"Oh that's wonderful!" the lady said. My instincts were yelling at me to bolt. This woman couldn't be normal. "You certainly made the right choice. Have you reviewed the monthly and yearly benefits? Depending on your insurance company, the deals slightly differ."

"I did not know that!" Lynetta exclaimed. I hid a smirk, Lynetta's acting sure was convincing. "Do you mind reviewing those deals with me again? I also want to know which new models would be most suitable to Adrian's tastes."

"Certainly," the lady said pleasantly. She led me and Lynetta to an empty booth. There was a male employee there waiting for us. I scrunched my nose, narrowing my eyes slightly. This guy smelled funny. I threw Lynetta a warning look, and she nodded once. "Mr. Morgan, do you mind if you help these two customers out?"

The man glanced at us. "Of course not, I am always glad to help newcomers." He smiled at Lynetta. "Please sit down, Ms…?"

"Lee," Lynetta answered, "call me Ms. Lee."

"Ms. Lee," Mr. Morgan said, "let's start going over the process."

I sat there quietly, listening as Mr. Morgan went over the different package deals with Lynetta. I sat there a minute longer, before I suddenly clenched my arms over my stomach, letting out a groan.

"Adrian, are you alright?" Lynetta said, concern appearing on her features.

I shook my head, "I think…I ate something sour. Mr. Morgan, is there a restroom I can use?"

"We have one right down the hallway on the left," Mr. Morgan said with a smile. "Make sure you reach the end of the hall. I wouldn't want you entering one of the offices by mistake."

"Okay, I'll see you later Sarah," I said to Lynetta, excusing myself. Those offices are exactly what I intend to raid.

I walked down the hall casually, looking through passing glass windows to check for empty ones. I eventually did find one labeled for one of the secretaries, and when I turned the knob, the door was locked. I opened up my backpack and took a makeshift lock-picker Lynetta had given me. After turning it a couple times, the door gave the desired click! I went in hurriedly, closing the door behind me and drawing the blinds closed. Thankfully, no one had noticed the break in.

I walked up to the tidy desk, there weren't many papers out. I still didn't know what information I
was looking for, but Athena said I would know right away once I saw it. I'd just have to put a little trust on her claim for now.

I rummaged through the desk drawer first, seeing nothing but writing utensils and blank sheets of paper. Seated on the armchair, I moved on to the side drawers, and I found files of customer details and an agenda book filled with appointment dates. I flipped through the book, not recognizing the names but I tossed the book in the bag anyway. After looking through some more useless ads, my attention drew towards the file cabinet.

I picked at the lock, this time having slight difficulty. I took a couple more minutes and finally, the file cabinet was opened. I scanned through the tabs, and one name caught my eye:

**Crusty Clyde.**

Now who went by the name of 'Crusty' in this day and age? I immediately pulled out Crusty's file, and behold: I found phone records of when Crusty called for water bed merchandise and whatnot on his T-Mobile phone. There were also notes on water damage, and even one request of making his phone celestial bronze resistant.

Bingo.

As I placed the whole file into my bag, there was a loud chaotic sound coming from the other end of the hallway. An alarm sounded, and I knew instantly that either Lynetta or Walt had been detected.

With fumbling hands, I grabbed as many of the files as I could and shoved them into my bag. I heard Walt's voice from the listening device planted in my ear.

*Hunter, where are you? I heard the alarm! Are you alright?!!*

"I'm in an empty office, Walt," I answered quickly. "What happened?!!"

*It must be Lynetta then, Walt said hastily. I already planted the Greek fire bombs. They're set at five minutes and counting! Find Lynetta and get the hell out of there!"

"Alright, I'll meet you soon." I said before Walt cut off our communication. I cursed under my breath. Just when I hit the jackpot and then this! There was still another drawer I haven't even opened! I knew I should have got out right now, but I had to get the rest of those files!

I took out the gun I had hidden behind my back. Being discreet didn't matter now. I aimed at the lock, and managed to grab another two or three files before the door of the office opened. The T-Mobile employee came in flustered.

"Mr. Peterson, are you-!" He stopped. Noticing I was not this 'Mr. Peterson', and how the file cabinet was raided, his mouth suddenly became lined with fangs.

Before he could even transformed into his real form, I already shot the monster in the face twice before jumping over his crumbled body, a couple of the papers flying out of my bag before I zipped it up.

I ran back the way I came, the alarm echoing thunderously and there were tons of workers running out. There were gunshots, and I saw Lynetta in the midst of shooting anyone or anything that got too close. Her hair was in disarray as she dodged fatal attacks while reloading her rifle. I quickly joined her in combat, taking out my other hidden gun strapped around my waist, shooting instantly.

"Adrian!" Lynetta yelled, indicating the entrance with a turn of her eyes. She continued to use my
alias as planned. I nodded immediately.

We fought our way past another barricade of monsters. There were dracaena, a couple hellhounds, and monsters I couldn't identify at the top of my head. Remembering the bombs, I crouched low to put my guns back into their previous placements and avoided getting shot at while Lynetta continued aiming at them with her rifle. I felt the familiar, serene touch of my summoned bow and I shot at them five arrows at a time. A space opened and Lynetta and I sprinted through the automatic doors when seconds later, the explosions started.

Lynetta and I had continued running, never once looking back. I could hear the clashing of stone and glass shattering as the bombs detonated one after another. By the time I turned around at a safe distance, the T-Mobile Center was already encompassed in a large gulf of smoke. The sound of police sirens and ambulances grew louder as each second passed.

"Are you okay?" Lynetta asked, her face and hair filled with smoke, her clothes looking worn and dirtied.

I gave a hesitant nod, my ears still ringing from the loud noise. Seeing as how I could hear Lynetta just fine, I thanked the fates I didn't suffer partial deafness. "I-I got the papers. Not all of them, but most. They're names of monster clients."

"Good," she breathed, her voice slightly raspy from exhaustion. "That's good. Well done, Seth."

"LYNETTA! HUNTER!" Both of us turned to see Walt yelling out of his approaching jeep. "Are you both alright?!" He pulled to a stop in front of us.

"We're fine, Mr. Forger," Lynetta said, recovering. "A narrow escape, but we're fine. Seth got the information we needed."

"Thank the gods," Walt muttered. "Hop in you two. I think we've got enough excitement for one day. Let's go get some lunch."

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When we got back, all of us proceeded to organize the files I ransacked.

"Not bad, Hunter," Walt commented, scanning a folder's contents. "I guess Lady Athena was right in choosing us for the job. You've managed to get a possible list of monster hideouts!"

I blinked in surprise. "Wait, seriously? You're saying those names I got are…!"

"Owners," Lynetta finished. "You didn't just obtain any random number of identities. I recognized a lot of the names here, Seth. I highly believe that the client folders you stole are monsters affiliated with prominent businesses." She flipped through another set of papers. "Oh look, here is a new one. I never knew Micro World was so involved…"

"No way," I muttered. "Let me see those!"

Lynetta handed me a stack, and quickly scanned through them. I came across Crusty Clyde once more, and then my eyes landed on another familiar one titled 'Aunty M'. There were also addresses listed in the clientele's information box. I was excited but also intimidated at the same time. I had no idea there were so many monster businesses. Who knew how many demigods wandered into one by mistake and never got out? I was briefly reminded of how that scenario had happened to me, and how glad I was to encounter Grover at the right time.
"Do you know what this means, Hunter?" Walt replied with a smirk. "You just uncovered the Titan Army's chain of resources! This information is a gold mine!"

"Wow..." I mumbled. To think I managed to accomplish all that by picking through some locks. I accomplished more in the last hour than I did the last two years. "So what do we do with them? We can't just go around bombing every place we see in these papers. They're located all over America!"

"Which is why you leave that to us," a new voice interrupted.

Almost simultaneously, Walt, Lynetta, and I turned towards the goddess of wisdom and battle standing by the entry door. How did I not sense her?

"Mother!" Lynetta called out.

"Hello, daughter, I see you are doing well." Athena greeted, before turning to me. "You see, Seth Hunter? Look at how much you managed to accomplish with some guidance. I knew you would succeed. And as for you, Walt Forger..." I didn't notice Walt tremble slightly under Athena's stern gaze. "It's been a while since you ventured out hasn't it? I'm sure you find this task...liberating."

Walt didn't say anything, his face suddenly paler, like he recalled something unpleasant.

"We did as you asked, Lady Athena. You want the files? Then take them and go," I said narrowly. My tone sounded hostile, but I couldn't help it. Lynetta and I could have died in this attempt, and after all the effort we put in, Athena comes in and snatches the prize? That left a sudden bitterness inside me.

Athena narrowed her callous eyes. "Again with the assumptions. You will do well not to let your own judgment blind you, Seth. It's unbecoming. What would your mother say?" I recoiled, like my mouth tasted something sour.

"What do you mean by that, mother?" Lynetta asked, the only one left undisturbed. "Do you not want the files?"

"I do want copies of them," she started, walking toward us at a leisurely pace. "Ignoring Seth's brash presumption, you three didn't complete my task fully."

I blinked twice to comprehend what she just said. "What?"

"I did tell you to proceed further after you obtained what it is you found," Athena replied. "In simpler terms, I want you three to investigate these areas. Find out more of the business' involvement. Are they active or passive in regards to supporting the Titan Army? Are any of the defected deities involved? I'll pick out a couple vital areas for you three to do what you wish, as for the others, the Olympian Council will decide on that."

"Decide," I repeated. "What is there to decide on? These places should be demolished!"

"If only it were that easy," Athena said softly. "These places hold a lot of financial weight in the mortal economy. If the Olympians were to root them all out as you suggest, the mortals will find themselves in yet another Great Depression. Not to mention, that these monsters will just continue to rebuild and create stronger companies to replace the ones they lost."

I clenched my teeth and said nothing. Why can't things ever remain simple for once?

"Gather the answers to the questions I just gave," Athena ordered. "Once you do that, my assignment will be complete." She snapped her fingers, and a couple of the sheets separated
themselves from the pile and stacked themselves neatly on the kitchen counter. "Go through those places, and send us the copies through Chiron. Oh yes, and Seth?"

I looked up at her, trying hard not to glare. Clearly, Athena was using us shamelessly. I couldn't believe I was saying this, but even Artemis had more tact and discretion when it came to getting what she wanted. Athena just kept stacking one thing after another at a rapid pace, claiming it was all one favor.

"Once you are done, I suggest you visit Camp Half-Blood," Athena advised. "Annabeth and the rest of your friends are missing your presence."

With a turn of her heel, Athena walked out of the kitchen. A moment after, I sensed that her aura has vanished, leaving us alone once more.

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July passed by quickly.

I continued to fulfill Athena's demands with impatience. I just wanted to get this whole damn thing done and over with. Out of all the gods, Athena was the one I found the most difficult (and the most dangerous) to deal with. She knew exactly where to punch my buttons and get the response she desired out of me and anyone else. She's also the one who figured out my fatal flaw before I even knew fatal flaws existed, making me wary of her even more. She reminded me of Aphrodite in some ways, and just thinking of that comparison made me want to vomit.

Athena had given us five different places, and we decided to use the same battle plan we did with the T-Mobile center (the 'T' actually stood for Typhon, could you believe it?), and it was effective. I managed to smoke out a bunch of dracaena at Sea World, and then tackle some telekhines in this antiques store a few days later, and I definitely didn't enjoy facing off some undead skeletal guards in DC again. Thankfully, I had Lappy with me this time, and the bloodhound was happily enjoying the well-deserved treat. All the while I was gathering all the info Athena wanted. I now even had a growing list of minor deity names.

Of course, not all the places Athena assigned was smooth sailing. Like Walt had warned me during my first day of training, mortals were a crutch. I usually ignored them, but this time, when I actually re-met Dr. Thorn at Micro World, those mortals were annoying! Always complaining about this thing and that, and then whining how their lives were oh so horrible. Hello? I rather dealt with a salary deduction than have hellhounds chasing after me any day. I was getting massive migraines while I sneaked around with Walt to help him set up the bombs.

If there was anything I enjoyed out of this, it was the look on Dr. Thorn's face right before I gutted him. Everything I had told him about the mortals dying ...all of it was a lie. I wasn't so merciless that I would kill so many mortals at once. That was just unnecessary and cruel. No matter how annoying they were, they still had families waiting for them back home. They were already evacuated after Walt caused a little fire accident in each of the plants.

But Dr. Thorn didn't need to know that. I had already given him the impression of being like one of those traitor demigods. No need to disprove that... compliment, knowing where I was heading.

I was now sitting shotgun in Walt's jeep after Micro World met its untimely demise. Walt was still pissed at me for letting him wait too long outside. Seeing his puffy red nose and watery eyes, I kind of felt sorry for him. I didn't have allergies, but what Walt was going through must be a pain in the ass.
"Medical advancements, ha!" Walt scoffed as we finally pulled up at his residence. I closed my eyes and sensed Lynetta's demigod aura within the house. I've gotten rather good at aura detection during the last three weeks. "They want the government to give them more funding? Those doctors can start by making better Benadryl!"

"Yes, Walt." I mumbled. It's just easier to go along with what he said. Walt had a nasty temper tantrum whenever those allergies of his kick in.

We went inside, and proceeded to do what we needed to do. I changed and started washing off the bloodstains that got on the suit I wore, and then continued on with the other chores. I was in the middle of sweeping the hall when I heard the phone rang. Lynetta went to get it, mumbling a couple words. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her scrunch up her face in confusion.

"I'm sorry, but you want to speak with Seth Hunter?" I raised an eyebrow. Lynetta listened some more. "Oh. I understand. Please wait a moment." She handed the phone to me as I approached. I was confused. Who would want to speak with me? No one at camp knew where I was surely…?

"He says he's a friend of yours," Lynetta answered, before leaving me to my privacy. I narrowed my eyes before I held the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Seth! Oh gods, y-you're really there!" I widened my eyes in shock.

"Will?" I exclaimed. "Will, how did you get this number? W-what…" I heard sniffling on the other end. Will's voice didn't sound right either. It was raspy instead of the easy-going tone I was used to hearing. "Wait…Will, are you crying?"

"N-no…" Will said rather weakly. I rolled my eyes.

"Quit lying to me bro," I said, keeping my voice light. "Tell me what's wrong? Why did you call me?"

I heard Will mustering up a breath to tell me, before he suddenly burst out sobbing. I felt dread starting to enclose around me.

"Will," I said steadily. "Will…damn it, just tell me what's wrong?!"

"It's Lee," Will finally choked out. "Lee Fletcher is dead. His funeral is in three days."

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Chapter End Notes

So the story is finally caught up with the prologue! I suddenly feel very accomplished! The next two chapters will be focusing on what happened during BOTL in Percy's POV and what occurred before and after the battle in Will's POV. There are major changes I made in the fourth book, so stay tuned!
Percy's POV
Takes place during the 4th Quest

Percy didn't know what to expect anymore.

After having to face demon cheerleaders, flesh-eating horses, and the she-monster Kampe, Percy thought he was about ready for anything.

Now there was a whole crowd screaming for his death. He noticed Annabeth and Rachel in the stands, surrounded by Luke and his goons. Grover and Tyson had yet to make an appearance, which could hopefully be good news at the moment because wherever they were, surely it was better than being caught up in his half-brother Antaeus' bloody gladiator games.

He had slashed through his first opponent, a dracaena, with ease. The crowd gave a **BOO**!

"NO!" Antaeus bellowed. "Too fast! You must wait for the kill. Only I give that order!"


Clare, who sat behind him, only rolled her eyes. "This is a waste of time. Even Ethan can do better than that. Right, Nakamura?" She nudged the dark haired kid beside her.

Ethan only swallowed heavily, "Yeah, sure." He didn't sound sure to Percy.

"You're right," Luke said. "Jackson needs a better challenge! Would you like that, Lord Antaeus? It will be more entertaining."

"Perhaps," Antaeus said, before addressing the whole arena. "BRING OUT THE NEXT CHALLENGE!"

When the gates opened, Percy was surprised to meet a familiar face.

"W-what are doing here?!" He exclaimed. "Michael, I thought you were at Camp!"

"I got lost." He said. "I went in the Labyrinth right after you guys. I thought I tail you but I ended up somewhere else entirely. I encountered these monsters and now I'm here."

Percy narrowed his eyes, suspicious. "Why did you decide to follow us?"

"I wanted to prove myself okay!" Michael yelled. "I don't like this either. How about we focus on getting out of here before we are forced to kill each other?"

"Sounds good to me," Percy muttered.

"Round Two!" Antaeus yelled. "And slower this time! More entertainment! Wait for my call before killing anybody, or else! NOW BEGIN!"
Michael took out his sword, his bow and quiver slung over his back. He charged, and Percy held Riptide up to counter. As they parried, Michael whispered.

"I got these *sonic arrows* my dad gave me. They should be enough as a distraction, but we need an escape plan."

Suddenly, Percy remembered the Stygian Ice whistle Quintus had given him, the one that called for Mrs. O'Leary. He didn't trust Quintus, which was why he held off on using it. Now, he didn't have much of a choice. "I got just the thing. Ready when you are."

He nodded. The two of them backed away. Michael quickly sheathed his sword and took out his bow, and with lightning fast speed, he notched three of his arrows and released them into the air. Percy couldn't hear a thing, but apparently the monsters around them did as they gave high pitch screams and moved to cover their ears. Antaeus bellowed out curses as he was forced to do the same.

"Annabeth! Rachel!" Percy yelled amongst the chaos. He uncapped Riptide as he put the whistle to his lips and blew hard. The ice instantly shattered upon use.

Annabeth and Rachel broke free from their guards as Mrs. O'Leary appeared: crashing hard against a Laistrygonian Giant, and tearing into Kelli the empousa like a chew toy. The she demon flew nearly 40 feet into the air before landing near Clare, who cried out in disgust. Luke glowered at him, his eyes filled with murderous craze.

"GET THEM!" Luke screamed. "THEY ARE GETTING AWAY!"

"Let's get out of here!" Percy called to his friends. "Come on, Michael. You can join us."

Michael hurriedly agreed, "So where do we go?"

"This way!" Rachel exclaimed, "The far exit! That's the right way!"

"Why should we follow you?" Annabeth said sourly. "You lead us straight into this death trap!"

"It's the way we needed to go," Rachel said. "And so is this. Come on!"

Annabeth didn't look too happy, but she ran along with them. When they stepped into the darkness, Rachel yelled 'DUCK!' and an axe swing by where moments ago, it could have been their heads. They kept running, turning left and then right, running until they were all out of breath. Percy felt a pang of guilt when he remembered Mrs. O'Leary. He didn't even wait for her to follow them, and she had fought to save their lives.

"Stop!" Michael gasped, his knees bent. "Gods, I'm exhausted. Can we take a break? None of the monsters are close."

"How do you know?" Annabeth questioned.

"Son of Apollo," Michael answered. "We're blessed with sharp hearing and eyesight. It's part of our music and archery skill."

"Oh, like Seth right?" Percy asked. Michael scowled at the mention of his cousin's name.

"Yeah," He grumbled. Percy recalled the animosity Michael had against Seth, and decided not to mention their MIA friend anymore. Unlike his siblings, Michael didn't get along with the child of Artemis.
They made camp and rested up. Rachel starting drawing monsters they've seen on the floor with a burned stick. With only a few strokes, Percy could instantly tell it was a dracaena. He didn't know Rachel could draw so well.

"We'll follow the path," She said, "The brightness on the floor."

"The brightness that led us straight into a trap?" Annabeth said sarcastically.

"Lay off her, Annabeth," He said. "She's doing the best she can."

"Anyone who could lead us out of that has got my thanks," Michael added. Annabeth only huffed and excused herself. "I'm going to sleep. Wake me for my turn okay?"

"Sure Michael," Percy said. Michael nodded and moved to another corner of the room, his back to them as he settled down. Soon enough, he was snoring.

Since it was just the two of them, Percy thought he get the chance to know Rachel better. He did show up unannounced and kind of dragged her into this Quest business, much to Annabeth's chagrin. Only a minute in, Percy realized he couldn't connect with her. They were just too different. When he asked her about her family, Rachel immediately shut down and decided to sleep. Annabeth finally finished pouting and told him she would take first watch.

His sleep was filled with images of Grover and Tyson, running in fear. Big, bad Kronos also decided to torment Percy with his stupid riddles. When Annabeth shook him awake, Percy felt like he didn't sleep a wink. There was an Earthquake, caused by what, Percy didn't want to know. Rachel continued to shout out directions as they followed her closely, and at long last, they reached Daedalus' workshop. After looking around, Quintus was the only one present. After demanding many times to see Daedalus, Quintus had enough and revealed his true identity.

"But you don't even look like Daedalus," Percy protested. His mind still couldn't make sense how a millennia old inventor could still be alive. "I saw him in a dream, and…" A horrible thought came to him.

"Yes," Quintus said. "You've finally guessed the truth."

"You're an automaton. You made yourself a new body."

"That's impossible!" Michael exclaimed.

"Nothing is impossible, boy," Quintus said. "It is only impossible if you let yourself believe it to be." He held out his forearm, and pressed his elbow. Part of his wrist popped open to reveal bronze gears and wires turning. "See?"

"That's amazing!" Rachel said in awe.

"That's weird," Percy said.

Quintus started his explanation with how he built himself a body and managed to evade death for thousands of years. His confirmation of what Percy saw in his dreams was what led Percy to believe that the swordsman was truly Daedalus. Mrs. O'Leary showed up, unharmed, and Percy was glad about that. Their conversation went down a bad spiral when Daedalus revealed that the maze was no longer in his control, and how Luke already had Ariadne's string and the old inventor's allegiance.

"Someone's coming!" Rachel warned.
The doors burst open, and Kelli the empousa and two Laistrygonian giants came forth first before the rest of the monsters swarmed in. Percy instantly crouched down defensively, uncapping Riptide.

"There you are, my little demigods," Kelli cooed. She gave the two giants a tap each. "Destroy this cursed workshop!"

"What are you doing?" Daedalus shouted. The giants moved forward and slammed their clubs down at his inventions. "We had a deal!"

"Change of plans," Kelli said dismissively. "Kronos wants you out of the way, old man. We had a prior bargain with your old employee in Hades."

Daedalus paled, "Minos."

"He sends his compliments," Kelli said. "He gave us the directions to your workshop, which in turn led us to acquire Ariadne's string. His only price is your head, and Kronos intends to honor that promise. I'm sure Minos is just dying to see you again."


"Luke is…busy. He is preparing for the assault. But don't worry. We have more friends on the way. And in the meantime, I think I'll have a wondering snack!" She lunged at him, her claws and fangs out, transforming into her true form- one donkey leg, one bronze.

Percy sidestepped her attack, swinging Riptide to block her attacks. Annabeth also joined him, and together, they pushed the empousa back forcefully. The she-demon was quick, turning over tables and grabbing inventions to throw them off before aiming to slash at them. A jar of Greek fire shattered, and green flames started to spread quickly.

"Percy!" Rachel yelled. "Come get this!" She had on one of the bronze and silver wings they saw hanging on the wall. Percy tried to, but his path was blocked. The monsters towered over Annabeth and him, with Kelli still being a nuisance.

Kelli lunged, and managed to swipe Riptide out of his hands. Percy hit his head on the table as he fell, his eyesight now fuzzy.

"Percy!" Annabeth screamed.

"You will taste wonderful!" Kelli bared her fangs, but then her body went rigid. There was a golden arrow protruding from her back. Kelli gave a shriek before she vaporized in yellow smoke. Michael stood over him, his face filled with sweat. He offered a hand, and Percy accepted it wearily, his vision still unfocused.

"Thanks Michael," He said.

"Oh don't thank me yet," The son of Apollo mumbled ominously, "It's not over."

Percy looked around him, and realized Michael was right: the fighting was still going on. Daedalus and Mrs. O'Leary were still locked in combat against the giants. He along with Michael and Annabeth joined Rachel. They began strapping on the wings.

"We got to help Daedalus," He said.

"No time," Rachel said, "Too many coming!"
The fire has spread rapidly, and the smell of smoke was vibrant and intoxicating. Most of the furniture was destroyed, and the fires continued to creep towards the staircase.

"Daedalus! Come on!" Percy yelled.

"I won't leave Mrs. O'Leary!" He said, "Go!"

He hesitated. There wasn't any time to argue, and even if they stayed, they wouldn't be much help. So with a leap of faith, all of them plunged out of the open window, plunging down five hundred feet.

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After their suicide attempt, the rest of their journey went fine. The wings actually worked, and Rachel even got them a chauffeur that just dropped everything and took them where they needed to go. When Percy asked Rachel how she knew the guy, Rachel grew quiet and refused to give clear answers.

Their good luck ended when they reached the dark tunnel.


"I have to check it out."

"Percy, no."

"Luke could be right there," Percy pointed out, "Or…or Kronos. I have to find out what's going on."

Annabeth hesitated, "Then, we'll all go."

"No! It's too dangerous! What if-!" Percy got cut off when Michael shoved his way through, and went down the dark tunnel without another backwards glance, "Michael!"

Michael ignored him. Percy followed after him, and Annabeth and Rachel also went in despite his protests.

They heard the sound of growling, barking noise before they even reached the exit. Percy instantly recognized them as the telekhines. The sea demon smiths he and Annabeth fought at Mount St. Helens, only he managed to get himself blown up all the way to Ogygia.

The telekhines weren't alone either: Ethan was helping them unwrap something. Clare also stood by watching, her arms crossed. She appeared bored.

"Careful, fool," the telekhines scolded Ethan. "One touch, and the blade will sever your soul from your body."

Ethan looked sick. "Maybe I'll let you unwrap it, then."

"So you guys finally finished it," Michael said, coming directly towards them. Percy widened his eyes in alarm.

"Michael, what are you doing?" Percy called out; turns out, that was a bad idea (blame his ADHD) as all the telekhines present suddenly shot him, Annabeth, and Rachel their attention. Some of them already had their swords pointing at them dangerously, surrounding them in all directions.

"Ew!" Rachel grimaced. "What are these things?"
"Telekhines," Annabeth hissed. "It doesn't matter now because look!"

She directed her gaze at a golden casket. Percy felt his body stiffen, and dread starting to ooze up inside him. It was the same sarcophagus that threatened to rise during their battle last winter with Atlas. Kronos was inside that thing. He had to be.

"Look who decided to show up at the party," Clare said. "I don't remember giving you guys an invitation."

"You didn't," Percy said, "We're the crashers."

"So it's just you and Annabeth," Clare said, and then she noticed Rachel. "And the mortal girl it seems. I'm surprised she made it this far."

Rachel looked uneasy. "I'm tougher than I look." Rachel scrunched her eyebrows, "Hold on, do I know you from somewhere?"

Clare drew a blank. "No."

Rachel didn't look convinced. "But you look really familiar. I'm pretty sure-!"

"I'm pretty sure I never met you before in my life," Clare cut in coldly, forcefully putting an end to Rachel's inquiries.

Meanwhile, Percy clenched his teeth in frustration as he struggled to think. How were they going to stop Kronos like this? Then, he noticed Michael. He should have taken account of the fact that the son of Apollo wasn't surrounded like they were, but it didn't stop him from asking:

"Michael! Kronos is inside that sarcophagus! You got to stop him from rising!"

Clare gave a laugh, "Oh wow. You really got them good."

"Michael!" He yelled again, but the son of Apollo still didn't move an inch.

"Percy, just quit it!" Annabeth said, narrowing her eyes. "Can't you see? Michael has betrayed us! He's the traitor! He used us to get here!"

Percy felt like he got punched in the gut. Why hadn't he seen this earlier? He felt uneasy when he heard Michael had followed them, and then back at the arena…when he said he wanted to prove himself…

"You wanted to prove yourself to the Titans," He said aloud. "Not the gods."

Michael regarded him coldly. "It's just like Annabeth said, Jackson. I don't have any love for the gods. What I would love is to see the Titans put those Olympians in their place."

"That can't be the reason!" He protested. "You told me you got those arrows from your dad…"

"Useful trinkets," Michael snapped. "You think that just because I got something from Apollo means he is excused for all those times he isn't around?! He hardly acknowledges his children!"

"Our parents barely contact us either! You don't see us lining up to join Kronos." Annabeth said. "Michael, this is wrong and you know it! Your brothers and sisters-!"

"…can care less about me!" Michael shouted. "All they care about is who gets the next highest score on the archery board! Who gets this next best thing blah blah blah! Hunter even dares to mock
me…!” He broke off, alarmed.

Percy understood. "It's because of Seth. You're doing this because of your hatred of him. You... you're jealous of him!" Michael was livid.

"I'm not jealous-!"

"You are!" He said. "You envy how your siblings always pay more attention to him, and you always tried so hard to beat Seth at archery, and then that time with your dad…"

"SHUT UP!" Michael shouted; his hands to his ears to block out the noise. His face was red with anger. "Hunter is lucky he isn't here right now because I won't hesitate to put an arrow through him!"

"Michael, you can't just switch sides just because you hate this one person," Annabeth said pleadingly. Michael scoffed.

"I'm not doing this because of that freak, Annabeth," Michael retorted. "I have my reasons for what I'm doing. Hunter is the least of them."

Annabeth hesitated, but she still kept trying. "No reasons are worth the risk of eternal punishment in the afterlife, Michael, because if you go with them, and end up resurrecting Kronos, that is what you are heading towards! Percy and I have seen the Fields of Punishment, and that place is awful!"

"That's assuming the gods will win," Clare muttered. "When the Titans take over, there won't be a Fields of Punishment for us."

Annabeth ignored her. "Please, talk to your siblings! I'm sure any of your brothers and sisters would listen if you told them how you felt! We can contact your father and get him to understand! Don't do this!"

Michael paused, his features softening by a tiny degree. "It's too late."

"No it's not!" Annabeth urged. "You can still come back from this Michael! No one will blame you if you give up on this. You saved Percy from Kelli earlier didn't you? I know you're not a bad person!"

Michael didn't answer. He was starting to have doubts, and Clare noticed this.

"They're lying, Michael," Clare said. "They'll say anything to stop you. They are nothing but empty promises. Kronos, however, will reward you greatly if you do this. I guarantee it."

"Do what?" Percy demanded.

Clare motioned her head towards the sarcophagus. The vibrant aura and mist around it has thickened.

"He stirs," She whispered, and then she called, "Prepare the gifts! Our lord is about to be with us! You all will have the privilege to see his new awakened form!"

Percy definitely didn't like the sound of that.

As the telekhines shuffled about, Percy noticed them carry in Kronos' re-forged symbol of power: a scythe. A six foot long blade curved like a crescent moon, with a wooden handle wrapped in dark leather. The blade was made of steel and bronze. It was same weapon Kronos used to slice up his father, Ouranos, before the gods took it and sliced him up and cast his pieces to Tartarus. The telekhines placed the scythe in front of the coffin.
"It's your turn, Michael," Clare said. "Kronos needs only one more half-blood who has yet to swear allegiance to him."

"Don't do this Michael," Annabeth said earnestly. "Please."

Percy couldn't tell what the son of Apollo was thinking as he stared at Annabeth in the eyes. He shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry," He said. "But I did not come all this way only to turn back now. I won't be just another face in that cabin…not anymore."

He turned towards the dais. "I renounce the gods! Why should I care what happens to them? I will see their fall with my own eyes! I swear my allegiance to Kronos."

The building rumbled, and a wisp of blue light flashed from the floor of Michael Yew’s feet into the sarcophagus. The coffin began to shimmer, and the case opened:

It was Luke Castellan.

Annabeth let out a gasp as Luke turned to look at them, his movements almost robotic. Up close, Percy noticed the change in his eyes. Instead of blue, it was now solid gold. He leaped out of the coffin with ease, and when his feet made contact with the floor, the marble became frozen with ice. He looked at Michael, who was now trembling. He noticed the telekhines gathered before him, and then he saw him, Annabeth, and Rachel, who was gaping in shock.

"Luke…?" Annabeth whispered. She widened her eyes in fear, her voice despairing. "Luke, is that you?"

"Hello, little girl," Luke said. His voice lined with something dark and metallic, something ancient. "Luke is currently not available. I must say, this body is very well prepared. Don't you think so?"

None of them answered. Clare and Ethan were kneeling, their faces to the ground. Michael was still trembling in fright. Annabeth looked about ready to collapse.

"Percy!" Rachel yelled. Her voice got them to snap. Annabeth got up and put on her Yankee's Cap, vanishing in seconds. Percy uncapped his sword as the telekhines backed off. Some of them vanished as Annabeth managed to stab them undetected.

Percy charged, Riptide in hand, and aimed his blade straight at Luke's chest. His blade deflected with a clang! His body sounded like it was made of pure steel. Luke, or Kronos, gave an amused smirk before he lifted a hand and caused him to slam against a marble pillar.

He struggled to get up. He felt a hand help him, and realized it was Annabeth. Kronos held the new scythe in his hand, admiring it.

"Ah…much better," He said. "Backbiter, Luke called it; an appropriate name. Now that it is re-forged completely, it shall indeed bite back."

"What have you done to him?" Percy shouted.

Kronos laughed and raised his scythe. "He serves me with his whole being, as I require. The difference is he feared you, Percy Jackson. I do not."

That was when Percy made up his mind. He grabbed Annabeth by the arm, and ran like Hades. They didn't stand a chance against him. There was no doubt in his mind that they would lose if they
tried to fight him again. His feet however, didn't cooperate with him. They felt like lead, and Percy felt like the world had suddenly slowed down. Time had slowed down.

"Run, little heroes," Kronos mocked. "Run!"

He approached them casually, enjoying the feel of his scythe as he twirled it around to his leisure. Just when he was only ten feet away, Percy heard Rachel yell.

"Oh no you don't!"

Something flashed past him, and a blue plastic hairbrush hit Kronos in the eye.

"Ow!"

The distraction served its purpose, Percy felt like he could properly run again, and without a second glance, the three of them ran until their breath ran out.

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They would have kept running if Annabeth didn't notice Grover's Rasta cap.

Percy's hands shook as he picked up the cap. It looked like it had been stepped on by a huge muddy boot. After all he had gone through today, Percy couldn't stand the thought that something happened to Grover, too. Tyson might also be in trouble.

He studied the ground, and he realized it was littered with wet mushy footprints. He didn't need a tracker to tell him that the footprints led off to the left. They quickly followed them, delaying their return to Camp Half-Blood. Each of them had to know if Grover and Tyson were okay.

Eventually, they reached them. Tyson was sitting by the banks of an underground river, cradling Grover in his lap. Grover's eyes were closed, his body still.

"Tyson!" He yelled.

Tyson looked up, "Percy! Come quick!"

"What happened?" He questioned.

Tyson gave them a brief explanation of how Grover had suddenly dashed off towards this direction when he sensed Pan's presence. His unconsciousness mirroring that time in New Mexico, when he heard the wild god speak. Grover awoke soon after some prodding, and after some quick introductions, Percy and Annabeth helped Grover up as they crossed the river.

When they finally stepped onto the banks, they discovered a cave and cautiously went inside. Percy widened his eyes in wonder as he saw various plants and animal life. His body, which was overcome with fatigue, was now renewed with strength and vigor. The aroma was filled with the fresh scent of flowers and other exotic vegetation. The walls were decorated with beautiful crystals, and the cave floor was covered with fresh moss. In the center of the cave was a Roman-style bed, gilded wood shaped like a curly U, with velvet cushions. An old satyr lay upon it, accompanied by a dodo bird, a huge rodent, and even a woolly mammoth.

Grover fell to his knees in front of the bed, "Lord Pan!"

Lord Pan smiled, but his eyes were sad. "Grover, my dear brave satyr, I have waited a very long time for you."
"I…I got lost."

Pan laughed. It was a wonderful sound, like the first breeze of springtime. The tiger-wolf beside Pan sighed while the dodo bird started humming a song. After some icebreakers, Grover pleaded that Pan return with them.

"I have slept many eons," The god said forlornly. "My dreams have been dark. I wake fitfully, and each time my waking is shorter. Now we are near the end."

"What?" Grover cried. "But no! You're right here!"

"My dear satyr," Pan said. "I tried to tell the world, two thousand years ago. I announced it to Lysas, a satyr very much like you. He lived in Ephesos, and he tried to spread the word."

Annabeth's eyes widen. "The old story: A sailor passing by the coast of Ephesus heard a voice crying from the shore, 'Tell them the great god Pan is dead.'"

"But that wasn't true!" Grover's voice trembled.

"Dear Grover," Pan said. "You must accept the truth."

"B-but gods can't die!"

"They can fade," Pan said. "When everything they stood for is gone; when they cease to have power, and their sacred places disappear. The wild, my dear Grover, is so small now, so shattered, that no god can save it. My realm is gone. That is why I need you to carry a message. You must go back to the council, tell the satyrs, the dryads, and other spirits of nature the great god Pan is dead."

There was much protesting, but in end, Grover accepted the lost god's words morbidly, his face shrouded with grief. Then, Pan addressed each of them his last words:

"Percy Jackson," the god said. "I know what you have seen today. I know your doubts. You will be forced to make difficult choices. But I give you this news: when the time comes, you will not be ruled by fear."

He turned to Annabeth. "Daughter of Athena, your time is coming. You will play a great role, though it may not be the role you imagined."

Then, he looked at Tyson. "Master Cyclops, do not despair. Heroes rarely live up to our expectations. But you, Tyson- your name shall live among the Cyclopes for generations. And Miss Rachel Dare…"

Rachel flinched, her expression almost one of guilt. Pan only smiled and raised a hand in blessing.

"I know you believe you cannot make amends," He said. "But you are just as important as your father."

"I…” Rachel faltered. A tear traced her cheek.

"I know you don't believe this now," Pan said. "But look for opportunities. They will come."
With that said, Pan closed his eyes and asked Grover to carry on his message once more, and asked that he release him. Grover wiped his eyes, and then he slowly stood.

"I've spent my whole life looking for you. Now...I release you."

Pan smiled. "Thank you, dear satyr. My final blessing."

He closed his eyes, and the god dissolved. White mist divided into wisps of energy, and it quickly filled the room. A curl of smoke went into Percy's mouth, and the others, but mostly into Grover. The crystals surrounding them dimmed, losing its brilliance. The animals sighed and gave sad looks before they turned gray and crumbled into dust. The plants around them also withered and died. They were now in an empty, dark cave, void of life.

So this is what happens when a god fades, Percy thought. He placed a calming hand on Grover, who took a deep breath.

"We should go now," Grover said. "And tell them. The great god Pan is dead."

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Rewind Part 2

Chapter Summary

Will Solace's POV
Before and Aftermath of the Battle of the Labyrinth

Chapter Notes

In case people are wondering- Here is the list of ages the characters are as of now:
Seth: 15 (turning 16)
Percy: Just turned 15 (Annabeth is also 15)
Will: 14
Michael: 16
Lee: 19
Clare: 17 (Her birthday will be January 3rd)
Bianca: 13
Nico: 11

Will Solace missed having Seth around.

He was, predictably, at the archery range, practicing his aim at the moving targets. After weeks of persuading, the Apollo Cabin managed to convince Mr. D and Chiron in upgrading the targets. Now, the targets were no longer stationary, no longer the same standard size, and there were even obstacles meant to obscure the archer's vision and reflexes. Will plucked his bow and the twin arrows made a *swoosh* noise as it hit the center of two boards.

*This is getting dull*, Will thought silently as he retracted his bow. Lee, since he was oldest, had his counselor duties so he wasn't always available. Michael preferred practicing alone, and his younger siblings didn't pose much of a challenge to him. It was Seth that always took up his offer whenever he asked, and Will was starting to realize how much he took Seth's time for granted.

He had noticed his cousin's absence only two days after Seth had abruptly departed from camp. He was standing outside Cabin Eight, waiting for the door that would never open. When he questioned Chiron about where Seth had went, the centaur had told him how Seth felt 'compelled to leave' and how he 'couldn't disclose where he went' despite the amount of protests on Will's part. He also asked when Seth was coming back, and apparently, Chiron had no idea.

Will couldn't help but feel a stab of resentment at Seth ditching him. His older cousin had told him nothing about leaving camp, not even a quick 'Hey, so I'm leaving camp now. Don't contact me okay? See ya!'

It wasn't like Seth shared everything with him. He had his secrets to keep, and Will wasn't one to pry. He had his own secrets too, and since the beginning, the two made a deal not to get into each other's personal business and it worked out just fine.
Now, Will wasn't so sure. Sometimes, he felt like Seth was drifting further and further away, slowly changing into someone he couldn't recognize. Just the other day, Annabeth had asked him about Seth's whereabouts and was briefly startled by his cluelessness.

_of course she'd be surprised_, Will thought sourly. _We're rarely seen apart._

Annabeth was disappointed. She had wanted Seth as a Quest partner, but seeing as how he was absent, she picked Percy _and_ Tyson (despite Chiron's opposition) after Grover volunteered. After hearing how she and Percy Jackson had accidentally stumbled across one of the entrances to the Labyrinth, the Camp had issued a Quest and a code red lock down. No one was allowed outside the camp's boundaries, and the harpies were working overtime. Even the dragon guarding Thalia's Tree was declared full-time sentinel. Mr. D had even appeared worried, and when he thought no one was looking, Will had caught the god watching his sons, Castor and Pollux, more closely than before.

The son of Apollo slung the bow across his chest, and gathered a new stock of arrows into his quiver before he flung it over a shoulder. He took out an IPod, sticking the buds in each ear with the song 'Light 'Em Up' blasting at full volume, humming the song's lyrics as he casually tried to ignore the dreary scene surrounding him.

There were so many grim faces. Even the Aphrodite campers weren't their usual selves. Normally, they were the ones with the latest gossips, always smirking and smiling from time to time. Now, like everyone else, they were focused only amongst themselves. Will noticed Silena Beauregard looking quite distressed while speaking with her boyfriend, Beckendorf.

Will Solace snapped out of his silent observations when a familiar voice called, "hey Will! Wait up a sec!"

He noticed Jake Mason walking up to him. He lowered the volume on his IPod. "What's up, Jake?"

"Are you free right now?" the son of Hephaestus questioned. "If you're not, it's okay. I just noticed you seem a little under the weather."

"Aren't we all?" Will muttered under his breath. "How's your cabin doing, Jake? I noticed how you and your siblings have been working nonstop in that workshop of yours."

Jake gave a strained smile. "It's alright. A lot of late nights, but someone's got to get the weapons polished and ready. If another weapon meant saving a life, then we got to be put forth our best effort."

"You guys are doing great," he said. "I can only wait around until someone gets hurt and then play doctor. I wish I could help you guys."

"Come on, Will." Jake said, rolling his eyes. "Everyone has different skills, and just because you can't tinker something, it doesn't mean your skill is anything less than ours. Besides, you be working overtime soon enough. No offense to the Quest members, but I feel it's only a matter of time before the Titan Army finds us."

"Let's hope it won't come to that," Will murmured, feeling his hands clench tightly for a moment. Suddenly, his head felt a flash of piercing pain as _images_ flooded into his mind. It felt like someone just took a hammer and started whacking him on the temple. Will involuntarily bent his knees with his hands pressed against his forehead. Jake gave a look of alarm.

"Are you okay?!" Jake exclaimed. "_Di immortals_, maybe I should call Chiron-!"

"Don't," he interrupted. "I know what's wrong. It'll pass."
Jake didn't look convinced. "You sure about this?"

He nodded as he got up, his legs a bit shaky. The hammer had ceased movement. "Yeah, I'll be fine. I'm going to my cabin to lie down a bit."

"That's a good idea," Jake said. He looked up when he heard Beckendorf call for him. "I gotta go. Just take it easy, Will." He gave the son of Apollo a comforting pat on the shoulder before walking past him.

If only it was… Will thought, and without further adieu, he went along his way silently.

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Unfortunately, his rest was anything but pleasant. That night, when his siblings had all gone to sleep, Will decided to stay up late to carve his third hand-made bow of the month. The monotonous scraping and sharpening of wood kept his mind occupied, but the chore could only do so much. His blue eyes grew weary, and he fell asleep without knowing it.

His slumber was plagued by nightmares and horrifying images.

He was shrouded in shadow, and he heard a thunderous sound, like a volcano had erupted. The ground beneath him shook before cracking open. Will screamed as he saw skeletal soldiers crawl out of the earth, their bony fingers grabbing hard. He squeezed his eyes, wishing this dream to be over. Then, the scene changed…

This time, he clearly recognized the person before him: Michael. He appeared to be…lost and frustrated. He had his hands on his weapon and was mumbling incoherent words before disappearing into an endless tunnel of darkness.

Again, the scene switched. This time he saw an unconscious figure, his head struck and bleeding as the figure struggled to get back up. Will let out a scream when he recognized who it was…

"Will!" Someone shook him awake. Will woke, his arms flailing desperately before he saw Lee in front of him, bewildered. His other siblings, Kayla and Austin, stared at him wearily across the room, wondering what was wrong with him. Michael had on a scowl, clearly not pleased of being woken up at this hour.

"What happened?" Lee asked him. Will couldn't answer, instead, he only grasped Lee's shoulders… making sure he was really there.

"Y-you're alright," he uttered unsteadily. Lee frowned. Michael gave a roll of his eyes.

"Alright? He just got woken up by you, idiot." Michael said; his voice grouchy from lack of sleep. "Can we go back to sleep now?"

"Y-you're still here," he muttered at him, his eyes still drowsy. His 'dreams' always took a toll on him, and as he began to recover, and suddenly realized with horror of what he just said.

"What do you mean 'I'm still here'?" Michael demanded. "Where else will I be? I don't sleep walk FYI and I definitely don't wake everyone up in the middle of the night like some people."

"Shut up Mike," Lee scolded him. Michael only gave a huff before settling back into his bed, muttering something about 'Obnoxious younger brothers'. Lee turned to him, his countenance grim.

"Nightmare?" he asked him quietly. He nodded slowly. "Alright everyone, it's nothing to worry
about. Get back to sleep. I'll be taking Will out for a moment."

Will widened his eyes in alarm. "Wait, bro, I'm really okay-!"

"Sure," Lee said skeptically, before he gave a grin. "It's really nice out you know. I think the fresh air would do you some good." Will gave a mental groan. When Lee set his mind to something, it would take a lot to convince him out of it.

Will only sighed, too tired to try. "Fine."

Everyone mumbled incoherent replies before settling back in. Will got out and followed Lee outside. He quietly closed the gold doors before his older brother motioned him to sit next to him on the porch. There was nobody out. All the cabins around them were mostly quiet. Will's sharp hearing could pick up sounds of metal clashing in the Hephaestus Cabin, its occupants still hard at work.

"So what is this nightmare about huh?" Lee asked.

"It's nothing to worry about," he said carefully, making sure it wasn't a complete lie. Since Apollo's the god of truth, Will had to be careful with his words, otherwise his siblings could pick up on the deceit easily if they tried hard enough. His older brother only appeared more worried.

"This has been going on for far too long, Will." Lee said. "This isn't the first time you woke all of us up."

Will Solace gave a wince. It definitely wasn't the first, and he knew it wouldn't be the last. He gave a quiet "sorry".

Lee placed a comforting hold on his shoulder, making Will look at him. "I didn't call you out here for you to apologize. I know you can't control what you dream."

"Then why did you call me out here?" he muttered.

"You know I'm here to help you whenever you need it." Lee reminded him. "But I won't be able to offer my help if you leave me in the dark. You seem so out of it, and I don't think it's because of this Labyrinth problem we're facing."

Will clenched his teeth. He had almost forgotten Lee's sharp intuition. He and Seth could get on his nerves so easily without realizing it. His words gave a small tug on his heart, and Will briefly wondered whether he should tell him what's wrong. It was Lee after all, his favorite half-brother. He admired him greatly for his leadership, and he had always been Will's role model…

…and he was just so tired of hiding all the time.

Will took a deep breath before letting out the truth. "D-do you remember that time Seth got our dad to come visit us?" Lee was confused.

"Yes," Lee started slowly. "What of it?"

"Our dad had given each of us something," Will said. "He gave you and Michael sonic arrows, Austin a new guitar, Kayla a new electronic keyboard, and so on." He felt his hands shaking, and he clenched them tightly in a fist to stop it.

"I remember," Lee said quietly, staring at him. "You never did tell us what dad gave you. We asked, but you refused to say."
"That was because I didn't know what he gave me," Will forced out. "Not immediately. But then, Seth came back from his Quest, and I had said how I knew when he would come back, even days before it happened."

Lee grew still, comprehension washing over his features.

"Oh," his brother murmured. "I get it. So that gift dad gave you…!"

He gave a small smile. "Yeah, he made me a seer."

"That's awesome!" Lee exclaimed, shocking him a little. "Will, that's...that's amazing! Why didn't you tell us when you figured it out? There's nothing to be ashamed of!"

"I wanted to be sure," Will admitted, "I even tested myself a couple times, just to see how far it went. I was excited at first when I discovered it. I even told Seth by accident, and he didn't make a big deal out of it thankfully. It started out as a couple hours into the future, and then a few days. Now, it turns out I can predict as far as a week. It's always just images, no prophecies thank Hades. That's the Oracle's job. So I guess I'm only a 'partial seer' if that makes any sense."

"So you had this ability since last December?" Lee questioned. He nodded. "Whoa, and I thought my sonic arrows were great-!"

"It's nothing to be envious about," Will interrupted, putting his head against his arms, his legs bent. "I would trade this gift for those arrows any day, if it means getting some sleep again."

He felt Lee's hand let go of his shoulder, and his brother grew silent for awhile. Will didn't look up, only breathing silently.

Finally, Lee asked quietly, "you've been seeing bad omens haven't you?" Will gave a snort.

"If you can call them 'omens'," he replied sourly. "This year has been horrible to me. I didn't know what I could do, who I could relate to besides that mummy Oracle. The visions I had are disturbing Lee! None of the dreams are good news." Will exclaimed. "There's always someone who's hurt, in trouble, or even dying. What's worse is that these visions aren't set! You remember that game we had? You were partnered with Clarisse."

"Yes," Lee said. "Are you telling me you saw something happen during the game?"

He nodded again, swallowing hard. "In my vision… there was a figure trapped in darkness. I couldn't tell who the figure was, since the outline is fuzzy. I just knew that he or she seems to be suspended."

"Suspended?" Lee echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Like everything was in slow motion," he explained. "In my dream, I felt smothered, it was hard to breathe, and my whole body was like being covered in quick sand." He let out a breath, moving his hands casually to rub his shoulders, as if he was shivering. "I was wrong of course, because right after the game ended, it turned out the darkness and suspension must have represented the Labyrinth's time lapse, but instead of one person discovering it, there were two."

"Annabeth and Percy," Lee finished. "You only saw one person, not the other. Are you sure that vision was about them?"

"It has to be," Will insisted. "I had this vision right in the middle of the exercise! I always get the bad ones right before they occur! It's useless if there's no warning. I just…" He trailed off, letting out a
sigh of desperation. He was just so sick of this. "What am I going to do, Lee? You're the only person I've talked to about this, and just now...I saw something really, really horrible. But since they're not accurate, I could be giving off a false alarm."

Lee hesitated. "I think...it is best that you talk to Chiron about this."

"No," Will said immediately. "I don't want any more people knowing about this. Only Seth knew, but he isn't here, so the secret is safe...for now."

"Why Will?" he asked sincerely. "It's not like Chiron is going to display your talent for everyone to see."

"Maybe, but he's going to pressure me," Will replied. "Not intentionally, but he will. Even if my visions aren't accurate, Chiron will still continue to ask for my input, probably for reassurances. And when my visions go wrong...I don't want to disappoint him."

"Hey," Lee said. "How do you know your visions will always be wrong? You just got this ability last year! You just need practice-!"

"This isn't like archery, Lee!" Will interrupted. "I can't just harness these visions like I do a quiver and bow. I can't control it. I've lost count of how many times I prayed to Apollo to take the 'gift' back, and he doesn't answer me! I'm starting to think he's refusing my request rather than ignoring me. Have you ever heard of the story of Cassandra? She was a prophetess that always gave bad news, and no one listened to her!"

"Cassandra was also cursed by our father," Lee pointed out.

"She's not the only one," Will replied. He was starting to sound hysterical. "Hardly any of them got a happy ending. Just look at the Oracle we have here: Locked up in a dusty old attic in a dead body! What if I end up just like-!

"You are overreacting," Lee interrupted; his voice stern yet gentle. He placed both hands on his shoulders, as if to steady him. "You got to calm down, Will. You're not going to end up like the Oracle, or Cassandra, or any of those poor bastards in the myths. You know why? It's because you got me- and Seth when he comes back. If you ever need someone to talk to about these visions, come to me. Okay?"

Will stared at him in disbelief. "R-really?"

"Would I lie to you?" Lee said with a smirk, lifting a hand to ruffle his blond hair affectionately. Will felt the edges of his lips go up, and just like that, Will felt a lot better. He wondered how Lee did it. "We'll keep this conversation between us. I won't tell anyone about it, not even Seth or our siblings unless you allow it."

"Thanks, Lee," he said. Lee smiled in return and got up, and just before he opened the door, Will suddenly remembered the contents of his dream. "Wait, um, about my vision..."

"What?"

Will hesitated for a moment. He didn't even understand the majority of it, and what he saw might not occur, but still. It was better to warn him. "I-I think you should stay out of the fight."

Lee frowned. "Will, you know I can't do that. As counselor I have to be involved-!"

"I'm not talking about your involvement." Will interrupted. "I just don't want to see you fight...to see
you get hurt."

Will didn't like dodging around the bush, but he couldn't risk it. He had been reading books on any Greek seers and prophets he could find for the last few months. All of them had one lesson in common: don't reveal too much. Telling someone about their possible future might let that person end up with something worse and Will couldn't do that to Lee, no matter how much he wanted to tell him.

"That dream you had," Lee started slowly. "Was it about me?"

Will swallowed. "Y-yes." When Lee remained silent, Will continued in a pleading voice. "Please listen to me! You don't have to fight! You can be a healer instead…"

"My healing abilities are nowhere near your level," Lee pointed out. "Also, Chiron already named me, Beckendorf, and Clarisse the commanding officers. I can't refuse that." Noticing Will's fallen expression, Lee cracked a grin. "Look, if you're really that worried, how about you join my team? Let our younger siblings be the healers. You're one of our best archers after all. We can help each other out."

"I don't know, Lee. I've never fought on the front lines before. Archery has always been a sport to me, and I'm not a good swordsman. I'll drag you guys down."

And I don't know if I'm ready to risk my life, Will thought morbidly. That's why he always asked to be on the defensive line, where he felt the most useful, and the most secure.

What a coward I am, Will thought. And to think I actually goaded Seth into action…I'm such a hypocrite.

"There's no better time to learn than the present," Lee answered. "If you're worried about swordsmanship, I can coach you. As for archery being a sport…just imagine the monsters as those round-shaped practice targets. You'll get the hang of it."

"Well, since you put it that way…" Will trailed off, resigned. He could keep an eye on his brother more closely. That way, he would make sure that vision never came true. Lee looked delighted.

"That's the spirit!" Lee declared. "Come on, Will. Let's get back to sleep. Since you're joining me, you'll have to attend the early morning training sessions! I'll have to go over the battle plans with you. You know Malcolm right? He has some tips to give…"

Will Solace let out a small smile at Lee's enthusiasm, following his half-brother back inside Cabin 7. He had no more visions that night.

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Only four days after Will accepted Lee's invitation, the Titan Army breached the Camp's defenses.

"Fire!" Beckendorf shouted.

Will had to cover his ears as a series of catapults shot forth dozens of Greek fire bombs at the incoming army. He was beside Lee, who was calling out orders at a rapid pace. His sharp eyesight spotted two dozen dracaenas approaching their position, along with at least ten Laistrygonian giants.

"Archers," Lee yelled. Will scrambled to set his bow, his fingers fumbling due to nerves. "Get ready…fire!"
Will released his three arrows, his shots joined at least 50 other arrows in flight. The arrows soared down at their targets, and the dracaena and giants wailed in agony before Clarisse led her siblings to kill the rest of them off with their swords and spears.

They changed direction, and Will continued to listen for Lee's commands. He, like everyone else, wore a Greek bronze helmet and breastplate. His quiver slung over a shoulder, and a medium length sword strapped to his left thigh. Despite the armor, Will still felt vulnerable, exposed. He had never witnessed a battle at such a grand scale, and the level of violence overwhelmed him. He never would have seen any of this if he remained a healer. He felt his body tremble in fear, and he clenched the bow and arrows so tightly his fingers hurt.

Lee noticed this, and placed a hand on his shoulder as a way to keep him close.

"Just relax," he whispered; his voice stern. "We got this."

Eventually, more demigods were called to the fight. Lee instructed the others to back up any demigod that needed help. Wherever Lee went, Will made sure to shadow him. The two of them took down any monsters that got in their way: giants, telekhines, hellhounds, dracaena, and other monsters Will didn't have a name for. Just as Lee skillfully cut down a hellhound with his sword, Will noticed an empousa lying in wait. Her fangs outstretched as she leaped impossibly high towards Lee.

"Watch out!" he cried. Lee turned, his sword raised to defend, but that motion served nothing as Will managed to strike three fatal blows into the she-demon. Gold dust appeared and landed harmlessly on Lee, who was slightly stunned.

Lee gave a smirk. "Nice one, little brother. I owe you one."

"Be more careful!" Will chided; his breathing uneven. "If I hadn't got my bow up in time…"

"But you did," Lee interrupted, "and that's what really matters in the end. Now let's going, yeah?"

He nodded, and the two continued their onslaught of helping any demigods they came across. However, as Lee went to aid Malcolm and the Stoll brothers, Will heard a scream. He turned, and his blue eyes spotted Bianca Di Angelo. The girl was struggling to get to where Nico was, who was surrounded by telekhines on top of Zeus' Fist, but there were two giants in her way. Will hesitated as to where he should go.

"Go help her!" Lee ordered him, his back turned. He noticed Travis had pulled out one of their smoke bombs as Connor and Malcolm charged the beast with their swords, with Lee covering them. "I'm fine!"

Will swallowed heavily, before following Lee's demands. His body felt so heavy with the armor on, and sweat and dirt coated every inch of visible skin. Still, Will didn't feel tired as he ran as fast as he could. He pulled out an arrow from his quiver, and shot the arrow straight into one of the giants' eyes. The Laistrygonian giant stumbled about, swinging his club wildly before hitting his companion by accident. Bianca took that moment and cut the giants in the ankles, causing them to stumble. Will assisted her, and together, the two giants were soon sent back to Tartarus.

"Thanks," Bianca said quickly to him, before running to aid her brother. Will followed her shortly.

Nico was in the midst of fighting the telekhines three at a time with his Stygian Iron sword. For a young kid, Will had to admire Nico for lasting this long. The boy noticed him and his sister.

He shouted in alarm. "Stay back! It's too dangerous-!"
"No, Nico!" Bianca argued furiously. "I'm not leaving you!" She charged head on towards dozens of telekhines, slashing her way through in order to reach Nico. Will didn't follow her immediately, instead he concentrated and gathered sources of light into his hands, letting out a blinding flash.

The light caused the remaining telekhines to give loud-pitched shrieks. Many of them struggled to block their eyes from the white light. Will gave a high-pitched whistle, and forced many of them to kneel. The Di Angelos soon turned the tables, scattering the telekhines forces before destroying them utterly.

"We did it!" Nico exclaimed happily. "We beat them!" Bianca placed an arm around Nico protectively.

"What did I say about leaving me?!" the girl nearly yelled. "You could have died, Nico!"

"She's right you know," Will said, and Nico gave a scowl. "Are you both hurt anywhere?" They shook their heads. "That's good because another swarm is coming."

Bianca was taken aback. "WHAT?!"

"Twenty feet behind us," Will answered. Thank the gods for his sharp hearing. "They must have sensed the commotion. Get your weapons ready!"

True to his words, several monsters appeared, circling the three of them atop Zeus' fist. Will's face paled at the enemy's numbers. There were at least a dozen hellhounds and giants, five empousa, and at least twenty lizard men. He was running out of arrows, and his blinding light couldn't hold them off for long. He heard Nico whimper while Bianca held her sword with a shaky grasp.

In a split second, all the monsters attacked.

Will was about to say his final prayers, hoping against hope to come out of this alive, but the Fates had other plans. Bianca, red faced with anger and frustration, yelled.

"LEAVE US ALONE!"

The ground shook violently, and he and Nico struggled to remain standing as the earth burst open and all the monsters surrounding them screeched before being swallowed underground. The hellhounds tried to escape, but they were held in place by what appeared to be the undead. Will stared at the scene around him in horror, now realizing that his first vision was becoming a reality.

After what seemed like hours, all the monsters disappeared beneath the earth and the undead also crawled back to their home, their rusted armor making clanking noises. The ground shifted back into place, and the three of them were isolated once more.

Will still couldn't comprehend what just occurred. He had thought those undead things were going to gang up on them. They would have been goners if that happened. He glanced at Bianca, whose eyes rolled back, and Will caught her as she went limp, completely unconscious.

"Bianca!" Nico said worriedly. The boy locked eyes with him. "What happened?! What's wrong with her?"

Will took a moment to examine the girl's condition. "She needs to rest. Her body is completely depleted of energy."

Will shook his head. "I'm not sure." He knelt down, adjusted his grip on Bianca before picking her up bridal-style. "I'm going to take her to the Big House. She can't fight in this condition. She'll need a lot of rest and ambrosia to recover. Can you do something for me?"

"Anything!" Nico answered immediately.

"My hands are full, and the Big House is still a distance away," Will pointed out. "Bianca and I are depending on you to protect us from any monsters."

Nico understood. "Got it."

Will gave an encouraging smile. "Great, let's go."

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Will and Nico got to the Big House safely. Nico fought off a couple monsters that crossed their path but it was nothing too serious. Will called for one of his sisters to tend to Bianca, and as his sister laid the girl onto a bed, Nico stayed to watch over her.

Once the Di Angelos were taken care of, Will realized too late that he had left Lee alone for too long. He didn't know where his brother went. In fact, Michael has also gone missing. Will had asked around, asking where they had seen Lee or Michael last, and none gave a clear answer, and that worried him even more. For the second vision had hinted at Michael's disappearance, and Will could only pray that he was alright.

The Battle of the Labyrinth (as it was later dubbed) was soon drawing to a close. A couple of the cabins were in disrepair, and Will also noticed the Quest members have returned. While he was inside tending Bianca, the Labyrinth was destroyed through unknown means, and the monsters were now being forced back.

Finally, he got word from Beckendorf that Lee and some of his team had gone into the forest region to take care of any remaining monsters, while others were recuperating. Will gave a quick thanks before he headed there swiftly, his body weary.

He spotted Lee soon enough. He and two others were fighting against five other Laistrygonian giants. He saw his brother take down one giant single-handed, while his two companions, sons of Ares, took down another with spears. He ran towards them, summoning another burst of blinding light to confuse the last three giants, and the sons of Ares engaged them in battle.

While the sons of Ares were occupied, Will spotted two other giants come out of hiding, and his eyes widened as Lee aimed to shoot, only to realize his supply of arrows had ran out. One of the giants smashed a club down, and Lee jumped to avoid it. Will still kept running, hoping to reach Lee in time. He would not let that last vision come true. It wouldn't come true-!

…Until a giant landed a crushing blow to Lee's head.

There was a loud, deafening CRACK! His brother's body went still and crumpled to the ground. Will screamed as he furiously attacked the two giants. He leaped high into the air, slashing one fatally across the face with his sword before swerving to dodge the other giant's weapon. The sons of Ares realized what had happened, and they quickly aid him right after their opponents were defeated. The giant, predictably, was overwhelmed and was stabbed to death multiple times before disappearing.

"No, no, no…" Will whispered as he knelt by Lee. It was obvious to anyone the head wound was fatal. No amount of healing could bring Lee back. "H-he wasn't supposed to die! He wasn't supposed to…"
His last vision had told him that Lee would be struck, but he would be conscious still…not dead. He should have known better than to trust his visions.

He shouldn't have left him. If he hadn't left him, Lee would still be here. He was supposed to watch his back. It didn't matter if Lee told him otherwise, Will had promised to watch over him! He should have told him everything, and then Lee would have been more careful…

Will clutched Lee's body close to him, not caring that his hands and clothes were now stained crimson, sobbing quietly. The sons of Ares only looked at him pitifully, and they made no move to interrupt him despite the battle still going on.

-o-

There were too many good-byes.

Lee's body was covered by a golden shroud, decorated with bows and arrows and swans, creatures dedicated to their father. His body, along with Castor and so many others were being laid to rest. Each of the corpses was given a drachma, by tradition, in order to allow Charon to grant them passage to the Underworld. Will had no doubt that Lee would achieve Elysium, and that he would be happy there.

Many tears were shed, but Will kept his face somber. He felt like crying again, but he held back. Michael was still declared missing, and now that Lee was gone, Will was now the eldest and was named the next counselor of Cabin 7. He had to be strong for his siblings.

After the shroud ceremony was over, Will kept his distance. He didn't feel like talking to anyone, and anyone who did approach him, quickly realized that and sheepishly left him alone. Chiron announced that he would tell any family members of the deceased when and where the official funeral would be, and days later, Chiron had informed him that Lee's would be taking place next week in Connecticut. His mother had wanted his body close to home. Will only nodded, taking in the news solemnly before relaying the message to his siblings.

He went to sit down on the hillside, overlooking the sparkling lake. The sun had just begun to set, and the reds, oranges, and yellows painted the sky like a canvas, but in Will's eyes, the sun wasn't as radiant.

_Father_, Will prayed. _I wonder how you are feeling. Your eldest son just died, and another has gone missing. You gave me this gift, father, and I have failed to meet your expectations. I'm now the counselor of your cabin, and my siblings are all depending on me to carry Lee's burden, and I don't know if I can. Please tell me what I should do. Please._

There was no response, but Will suddenly felt warmer. He looked down to see sunlight encompassing his body in its golden glow. Will gave a brief smile. Was his father listening? Did he just answer him? He wasn't sure, but he wished Seth was here to see this.

Seth.

Will suddenly shot back up, cursing under his breath. His cousin had no idea what had happened. Seth was still away, and wherever he was, Will had to tell Seth what happened to Lee because he knew his cousin would want to know. It was his right to know.

That was why he was in front of Chiron's office table, his hands slamming against the desk as he demanded Chiron to let him contact Seth Hunter.

"I don't care if this place he's at is 'private'," Will argued. "Seth deserves to know what happened to
Lee, and he needs to know now! His funeral is in three days for crying out loud!"

Chiron started, "William Solace, please calm down."

"No!" he protested. "I'm tired of people always telling me to 'calm down'? I don't care where Seth is at, or what he is even doing! All I want is a simple phone call! That's not much to ask for!"

The centaur sighed. "You make a strong case, Mr. Solace. But if I give you the phone number, you are to promise me you won't pass that information elsewhere, and this call must be short due to security reasons. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Chiron," Will said, slightly impatient. "It will be quick…hopefully."

"Very well," Chiron muttered. The centaur got up, scribbling some numbers on a post-it note and handed it to Will. "There's a room in the back, just draw back the curtains and you will see a phone booth."

Will was relieved. "Thank you, Chiron."

With the post-it note in hand, Will found the phone booth and nervously dialed in the right numbers. Chiron had left him some space and privacy, which he greatly appreciated. He waited patiently for the other person to pick up, and instead of Seth's voice, a woman answered.

"Who is this?" the woman demanded. Will blinked, looking down on the post-it note and then the phone's screen to make sure he didn't mess up the numbers. It was correct.

"I-Is Seth Hunter available?" Will asked. He heard the woman give a sharp intake of breath.

"Depends on who's asking," she said narrowly, suspicious.

Will nearly slapped himself: he didn't even give his name. "I'm Will Solace, a close friend of his."

"I'm sorry, but you are a friend of Seth Hunter?" she said dubiously.

"Chiron is the one who gave me this number," he continued, "I have to tell Seth something urgent."

"You can tell him when he comes back," the woman replied, and just before she decided to hang up, Will interrupted.

"Wait! Please, a friend of ours just died! I want to tell Seth the date and location of his funeral!"

There was a moment of silence

"Oh," the woman said. "I…I understand. Please wait a moment."

Will grew anxious as he heard background noises. His hearing caught the woman talking to someone before handing the phone over.

"Hello?"

It was Seth's voice. It was really Seth on the other end!

"Seth! Oh gods, y-you're really there!" Will exclaimed. He just felt so relieved, and happy. He haven't had someone close to talk to for days. His breathing suddenly went heavy, and tears threatened to spill out. Will wiped them away quickly.
"Will?" Seth said incredulously. "Will...how did you get this number?"

He didn't answer immediately, his nose was clogged up and he sniffled. Seth caught the noise.

"Wait...Will, are you crying?!"

"N-no," Will lied. He momentarily held the phone away as he cleared his throat.

*Pull yourself together!* Will scolded himself.

He could imagine Seth giving him that no-nonsense look. "Quit lying to me, bro. Tell me what's wrong? Why did you call me?"

Will didn't mean to break down, but he did anyway. There was no point in hiding it from Seth now. Seth didn't realize that what he just said sounded so similar to what Lee would have said to him. The reminder came as a sharp slap in the face, and Will was faced with the harsh fact that Lee was no longer around.

*And it was his fault...*

"Will!" Seth shouted. He could tell his cousin was panicking. "Will, damn it! Just tell me what's wrong?!"

"It's Lee," he finally uttered, "Lee Fletcher is dead. His funeral is in three days."

He waited for Seth to reply, but instead he heard a *thud!* Will frowned. Did Seth just...drop the phone?

"W-wait a sec," Seth stammered a moment later. "I...Lee...h-he's actually...?"

"Yes, he's dead." Will repeated, this time with a sort of finality. "Listen, I like to tell you all about it, but Chiron is expecting this call to be quick, and so...I'll just tell you the address to the funeral for now."

He told him, and he heard Seth scribble it down rapidly.

"I'll see you there...right?" Will asked.

"Yeah...I'll see you there." Seth said quietly. "It was...nice hearing from you."

Will smiled briefly. "Same here."

With that, the phone line went dead.

-o-

The sky was gray and gloomy when Argus pulled up in front of the funeral home. It was a beautiful house with black shutters and whitewashed paint, its lawn primed and green. It looked too nice to be a place of mourning. Will and his siblings got out of the car, each of them dressed in black apparel. His sister Kayla had cried the whole way while Austin tried to comfort her. Each of them gave Lee's mother their regards when they went inside the house.

Will didn't stay too long though. Every time he saw a face, he was reminded of how much pain he caused each of them. The rooms were dark and stuffy, suffocating. Will hurriedly went out to the garden out back, standing there silently with closed eyes.
"Hey Will," a familiar voice called from behind him. Will turned around, and blinked twice to fully recognize the person known as Seth Hunter.

*He's so different,* Will thought. It had only been 8 months since they last saw each other, and in that short time, Seth grew noticeably taller, but he wasn't as tall as him. He was dressed in a black suit and tie, his hair swept back with few strands lingering over his bright silver eyes, giving a clear view of his face. His eyes had only slight shadows under them, which meant Seth was overcoming his insomnia. His whole physique was lean, and a bit more muscular. His complexion was light, but it wasn't pale like before. Seth looked *healthier* than Will had ever seen him.

*Where did he go all this time?*

"How are you holding up?" Seth asked quietly; his tone grim. He stood beside him, his hands in his pockets. "I came as soon as I got your call."

"You look good in a suit," Will said instead. "I don't think I've ever seen you wear one before. You should dress up more often."

Seth rolled his eyes, giving a very brief smile. "I only dress up if I need to. Suits are stuffy and hard to move in. Not my kind of thing. You don't look too bad either, and *you didn't answer me.*"

He winced inwardly. Will thought he try out Seth's tactic of changing the topic, but of course it wouldn't work on *him.* What could he say? That he was 'fine'? Or that he felt so guilty that it was like his heart just got stampeded on. Seth only continued to scrutinize him, his silver eyes making Will nervous. Then, the child of Artemis let out a sigh, before he stepped towards him…

…and *embraced him.*

Will was startled as he awkwardly placed his arms around Seth too, embracing him in return. His cousin wasn't one to give free hugs. In fact, Will thought Seth shunned physical contact save a few like Annabeth, Thalia, or Kayla, but it was always the girls who initiate the contact, not him. Usually, he gave a pat on the shoulder or a hand shake. That was what Will had been expecting. He never thought Seth would *hug* him. He was touched that Seth cared enough to do so.

*I'm sorry,*" Seth murmured. Will lowered his eyes, and right then, tears started to spill out again. He buried his face on Seth's left shoulder as he wept, because he knew what Seth really meant:

*I'm sorry I wasn't there. I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner. I'm so sorry I couldn't be there when you and Lee needed me…*

*No…* Will thought sadly. *I'm the one who is sorry.*

-o-
I was currently standing in front of the mirror, adjusting final touches of my suit before brushing my auburn hair in place, my eyes briefly looking at the reflecting panel only when it was absolutely necessary. I looked up at myself one last time before I quickly placed a thin cover Lynetta at last, bought for me the other day over the mirror, obscuring the thing from view. Lappy noticed this strange habit of mine.

Why do you cover up the mirror? Lappy questioned, sitting up on my bed.

I stared at the beagle briefly before answering. "I don't like them."

You mean you don't like your reflection, Lappy guessed. I sighed, not surprised by the canine's sharp intuition, even if he was just a dog.

"Why ask if you already know?" I muttered. I sat down on the bed next to him as I put on my shoes. Lappy settled into my lap so my focus was on him. "You're wasting your breath."

Back before I knew the truth, I detested mirrors so much I couldn't stand the sight of them. Seeing my reflection reminded me of what I was. Maybe that was the reason why I didn't care how good or bad my looks were like most people did. Why I didn't bother to dress 'fashionably' as Lynetta puts it, and why I preferred to look plain and ordinary. I even considered dying my hair once, but I decided against it since that act would be like me screaming out my innermost conflicts in public.

Now, I could tolerate mirrors…to an extent.

You and Artemis have already reconciled, Lappy started. Shouldn't your similar appearance bother you...less?

"It doesn't work that way." I stated. "Yes, we reconciled, but it's still very recent. Old habits die hard, Lappy, and it still doesn't change the fact that Artemis is a goddess and I am a clone who's playing the role of a demigod."

Lappy gave a sad look. I thought you realized that Artemis doesn't see you that way.

"She may not, and for that I am fortunate," I replied, "but seeing can only go so far: Artemis can pretend for her and even my sake that I am something I am not, but I am not so delusional. I am glad Artemis still believes in these fantasies, but she'll wake up sooner or later. I'm fully prepared for it when it happens." I noticed Lappy's eyes lowered, and I rubbed his head with a forced smile. "Don't be like that, Lappy. I'm accustomed to it now. No need to feel bad."

Lappy only grew silent as I finished tying my shoes and looked at the time. "Come on, Lappy. Lee's funeral is going to be starting soon."

The two of us walked out of my room quietly.
Lappy and I arrived on time at the address Will provided over the phone. I requested Lappy to stay outside until I called for him, and the bloodhound complied silently. I narrowed my eyes at his rather easy agreement before I reminded myself that I had other matters to worry about. I'd deal with whatever Lappy was going through later.

I went inside the funeral home silently. I introduced myself to Lee's mother, a middle aged blond woman with light gray streaks, but still had a beautiful countenance and figure. She seemed very kind, but sad. I could tell she was very attractive in her youth, no wonder Apollo fell for her.

I went inside, and the first known person I encountered was Austin. We shared a bit of conversation before I said some comforting words to the boy, who looked about ready to cry. Later, I asked him where Will went, and Austin told me he last saw him outside in the garden.

I quickly thanked him before I proceeded. I spotted Will soon enough. Even in a crowd, his blonde hair and tall stature made him easy to spot.

"Hey Will," I greeted. Will grew startled before he turned around and noticed me. I frowned slightly at the shadows and redness in his eyes. His face had become ashen, as if haunted.

*Oh Will,* I thought sadly. *Did Lee's death affect you this badly?*

I swallowed the lump of guilt in my throat. *"H-how are you holding up? I came as soon as I got your call."*

Will's eyes flickered slightly to mine before he forced a grin. *"Y-you look good in a suit. I've never seen you wear one before. You should dress up more often."*

I humored him. *"I only dress up if I need to. Suits are stuffy and hard to move in. Not my kind of thing. You don't look too bad either, and you didn't answer me."*

Will visibly flinched before he suddenly grew very quiet, which wasn't like him at all. Normally, Will was the one who was optimistic, chatty, and easy-going. Not like…not like *this*. I heard the sound of his heartbeat speeding up at a rapid pace, and his blue eyes suddenly appeared glazed. The sight of Will looking this grief-stricken was heartbreaking. Will has always been the one to cheer me up in the past, and now…I was at a lost. I didn't think any amount of words would do.

With that thought in mind, I let out a heavy sigh, stepped over and hugged Will tightly.

I felt Will stiffen in my grasp before he suddenly relaxed, his face buried in my left shoulder and I felt his arms hug me too. Despite how uncomfortable I was feeling, I heard Will's heartbeat slow down at a normal pace. I murmured a simple apology, and Will started sobbing when he heard it. I rubbed his back soothingly as he continued to weep, and I was reminded that Will was still very young despite his appearance. I only stood there calmly until Will finally straightened himself out and released me, wiping his tears hurriedly to appear decent.

"S-sorry," he sniffled. "I-I ruined your suit."

"It's okay," I said. "I can always dry-clean."

Will was confused. "H-how can you be so calm?"

"I guess…I just have more experience in handling this sort of thing," I murmured softly.
"Oh." Will mumbled before asking, "d-does it ever get easier?"

I shook my head. "No, it does not." Will let out a mirthless laugh, causing me to look at him funny, startled that I would ever hear such a sound from him.

"You're good at it," he explained with a half-hearted chuckle. "Hiding your feelings I mean. I wish I could do the same."

"Trust me, Will. You are fine the way you are." I said with a forced grin. "I would knock you senseless before you ever decide to be like me."

He cracked a small smile at that. "Aw, Seth. I didn't know you cared that much."

"It's the job of the older cousin to take care of the younger," I smirked. "Show some respect."

"I don't know Seth," Will shrugged, "that seems kind of hard with you shorter than me…"

I huffed indignantly. "I'm taller! I'm 5'10 now and-!"

"Oh, so you're taller than Annabeth now? Congratulations." Will mocked.

"Not everyone can be six feet tall!" I argued.

"Really? Let's see: Beckendorf is 6 feet tall, Percy's almost 6 feet tall, and even Luke is over 6 feet tall…!"

"Luke does not count!" I interrupted. "You just wait: I'm a late bloomer and I will grow at least another 2 inches!"

Will gave a mock yawn and looked at an imaginary watch on his wrist. "I'm waiting. Have you grown any taller, little cousin?"

"You brat!

I lunged at him and the two of us tumbled on the grass wrestling each other playfully. By the time we'd decided to call it off, the two of us were red in the face with sweat, our suits in disarray. There were bits of grass stuck in Will's blonde hair as he let out a gasp of air. He placed a hand on my shoulder as he gave a genuine laugh, his blue eyes sparkling with delight. Will was finally looking like himself again.

"You have no idea how much I miss having you around, Seth."

I gave a smile. "Same here, Will. I definitely miss you guys a lot too."

"Where have you been?" he asked, sitting up. "Only Chiron knew of your whereabouts, and it was a hassle for me to get a phone number to contact you. There was this lady on the phone too."

I shook my head. "Look Will, as much as I would like to tell you…it's not up to me."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Okay, fine. But you could have at least told me ahead of time? You just left without saying anything!"

I looked away sheepishly. "Right…um, I guess I was in a hurry to pack and there was a time limit and…yeah." Will folded his arms and raised an eyebrow.

"Too much of a hurry to say 'Good-bye'?"

"Will, I'm sorry. I really am." I insisted. "I'll make sure to tell you and the others next time okay?"
He frowned. "And how soon is this 'next time'? You are planning on going back to Camp Half-Blood with us aren't you?"


"You're leaving right after this?!" he exclaimed. "But... but you just got here! What's so important about that place you were at anyway? When are you coming back?"

"Whoa, Will, one question at a time," I said. "I can't answer your first question, and I don't know if I can answer your second. I'm not returning to Camp immediately, but I will soon since I have to drop off some things to Chiron."

"And then you leave right after," Will finished bitterly.

"No, Will," I said. "I'll stay a few days. We'll catch up, okay? I promise."

"You better," Will mumbled, "it's been boring without you. We could do with some excitement."

"I'm honored." I replied sarcastically.

After some more catching up, I got up and more or less, dragged a reluctant son of Apollo back inside the house. Due to injuries Lee sustained during this 'Battle of the Labyrinth' Will briefed me about, it was a closed-casket service. I saw Kayla seated by a grand piano, playing one sad song after another as the rest of us lined up to pay individual respects to Lee's body.

I was the last one in line. There were only one or two people left in the room, and they soon went out the exit, leaving me in private. Will and the rest of Apollo Cabin had already paid their respects and gone outside, probably waiting for me. I let out a deep breath as I gazed down at the polished coffin. There were all sorts of flowers: white roses and daffodils, and even sunflowers. I gently placed a white tulip I picked out prior and placed it amongst the rest.

"Lee," I began in a hushed whisper. "If you are hearing this, know that your siblings and I miss you very much. I hope you are having a good time in Elysium because you deserve it. You were the older brother I never had Lee. I remembered those times when you came out of your way to help me with archery, and even though I didn't realize it then, you and Will were the first closest friends I've ever had."

I paused to clear my throat, my voice became heavy and I struggled to keep it light. "I remembered you teaching me how to craft my first hand-made bow. Do you remember? It was the one made from a Cypress tree, a tree dedicated to your father and Lady Artemis. Too bad it snapped in less than two weeks, but it's the thought that counts, right? You helped me with my second bow too."

I paused again, struggling to say what I dreaded to say aloud, but after closing my eyes briefly, I finally mustered up the courage.

"Will told me what happened to you," I murmured. "Wait, scratch that: I forced it out of him. I can tell he feels guilty, but I know I am equally at fault. I wished I had said something...anything to you before I left Camp. I wished I came back when I was offered the chance, but it's too late now huh? I never even gave you a proper good-bye."

"But enough with the moping," I said. "I know you don't enjoy hearing this guilt crap, Lee. So I'll honor your silent wish. I'll try to look after Will and the rest of your siblings for you- I guess that includes Michael (wherever he is) even if he's a pompous asshole. I probably won't do as great a job as you did, but I'll try to help them just as you helped me."
The room was eerily silent as I concluded my final words to Lee Fletcher, son of Apollo, and previous cabin counselor of Cabin 7.

"May you rest in peace...Lee," I said with finality. I stepped back and exited the empty space, with the soft sound of the door shutting into place.

-o-

"I'll see you all again soon," I promised, kneeling down beside Kayla and Austin. "I just have some business to attend to, and then I'll come to Camp Half-Blood as soon as I'm able, okay?"

"Okay," Kayla nodded, her eyes still wet with tears. I lifted a hand to wipe them away.

I gave a small smile of encouragement, "If you still feel sad, play those wonderful piano songs you enjoy. I heard it's a good outlet to release negative emotions. Did you know about that?" She paused before shaking her head.

"I didn't know for sure," she said quietly, "but I always did feel relaxed after each song. I'll try doing that."

"I'm sure you will, and you too, Austin." I told the older boy. "Will told me about that new guitar your dad got you. The same goes for you."

"Alright Seth," he said.

I gave each of them a pat on the shoulder before I spoke with the rest of their brothers and sisters. Leaning against the car door, Will looked at me crossly before I sighed.

"Seriously, Will," I started, "I won't be gone for long. You have my word." He only nodded silently, before he started ushering his siblings into the car. I gave my regards to Argus and even helped him put some stuff into the car trunk. Soon, they were all packed up and I waved good-bye until the black car vanished from view. When they left, the sun was already setting, with night closely approaching.

"Thus, another day comes to an end," I heard a familiar voice say. I turned around slowly, keeping a stoic countenance as I stared at the goddess of revenge in the eyes.

"Lady Nemesis," I said narrowly. "I wasn't aware of your presence."

"I wasn't here for long," she replied. I noticed how she still kept most of her appearance the same from last we met. Only this time, she had on a waist-length leather jacket and black scarf wrapped around her neck. Her hair was frizzled instead of gelled, and her eyes flashed a menacing red. "It is only right that I greet my new champion every once in awhile."

"You mean you finally found something you want from me?" I rephrased. Nemesis gave an amused chuckle.

Instead of answering, Nemesis gave a wave of her hand and summoned two glasses and a bottle of wine in mid-air. She allowed one of the glasses to settle into my hand while she poured the blood red liquid until each glass was half full. I stared at her coolly as she took a sip, her eyelids closing as if to savor the taste better. I fiddled the glass with my fingers, but I didn't drink any of it.

"How blunt," Nemesis remarked later. "But yes, I do want you do something for me, but I see this task as more of a favor."
I frowned slightly in confusion. "How?"

"Tell me Seth," Nemesis said with a wicked grin that made me inwardly cringe. "How did Lee Fletcher die?"

I frowned. "He...he was struck in the head by a club."

Nemesis prodded. "And what struck him with a club?"

I stiffened, now knowing where Nemesis was heading with this. I felt my silver eyes harden with a renewed hatred- hate that I was sure was Nemesis' doing- as I was reminded once more who was truly responsible for Lee's death.

"It was...a Laistrygonian." I said with a strained voice. Nemesis smiled, satisfied with my answer.

"Exactly Seth," she said; her voice almost sounded like a purr. "And look what the Laistrygonian giants have done to you yet again: they brutally murdered your cousin. As if your late family wasn't enough, they decided to take away another person you deem dear. Can you ever forgive such a vile act?"

"Never," I said through clenched teeth. I felt my body shake, anger building up with each word Nemesis sprouted from her mouth. I should have taken account that Nemesis was the reason why I was feeling this way, but I didn't care, because I saw some truth in her words.

_How dare they kill Lee! My inner voice raged. They deserve to die!_

Nemesis placed a hand gently on my shoulder as she leaned in, whispering, "there is a gathering tonight. Would you like to take part in that gathering? I hear their leaders are there too, plotting on what to do next. I can take you there to interrupt their little party."

"W-why are you telling me this?" I finally said. "What do you gain?"

The goddess smiled. "Treat it as a celebratory present from me: for the advent of our patron and champion relationship." She held the glass towards me. "Cheers?"

I stared at the glass in my hand some more before I complied, the clashing glass making a _cling!_

"Cheers."

The wine tasted bitter.

-0-

It was midnight.

I sat in seclusion amongst one of the highest trees, my right hand held _Nightwalker_ while my left hand scraped against the tree bark for support. Sweat poured down my forehead, and my exposed arms felt icky in this humid temperature. My back was bare, having decided to leave my archery equipment behind in favor of better mobility. I leaped down from the branches silently, and I examined the tracks that I have been following for the past hour.

After Nemesis finished her proposition, I had called Lappy and asked him to bring me a new set of clothes from Walt's. He had asked why, but I refused to answer completely, only telling him I needed to be somewhere important. I knew that Lappy felt obliged to look after me since Artemis had ordered him to, but no matter what Lappy said, I insisted to be left alone. For one, this mission's
targets were personal. Laistrygonians have always been a sore topic. In the past, I remembered cringing slightly every time I heard of their cannibalistic acts from other campers, and poor Tyson became the unjustified victim of my callous verbal harassment, much to Percy's chagrin.

I made a mental note to myself: if I met Tyson again, I would apologize to him face to face. It was the least I could do.

Lappy reluctantly did as I requested. I quickly changed out of my tuxedo and into a sleeveless black hoodie and sweatpants. Instead of the usual sneakers I wore, I changed into combat boots. Nemesis had told me these giants were meeting in the woodlands, my kind of territory, and so it was best that I wore shoes that provided balance and protection. I already had my daggers on my person before I went to the funeral, and I had tucked a pair of archery gloves in my front pockets. Nemesis was at the agreed rendezvous point and she quickly teleported me to this place.

_I'll be watching you..._ Nemesis had said before she departed.

I darted my head up from the ground when I heard noises. I spotted a herd of animals running away, and moments later, there were loud thumping sounds similar to that of an earthquake. The forest seemed to shake violently as my new targets finally showed themselves. I kept my hood up and hid behind a tree until the giants- five of them- ran past me and after the forest animals.

After I was certain they were gone, I ran after them nimbly. I felt the moon's presence, and I wondered if Artemis was watching me. The moonlight shined on my being, and despite what I was intending to do, I felt a sense of calm and serenity. I felt _empowered_. I haven't had these feelings since...

I stopped in my tracks. The giants had just slaughtered a couple deer and were currently carrying the carcasses on their backs. I pinched my nose at the foul stench and forcefully kept my 'demigod' aura down to a minimum as they unknowingly passed by my hiding spot. I resisted the urge to gut each of them now, for I knew there were more, and these giants would be the ones that would lead me to the rest of them.

All I needed was _patience._

Eventually, the giants came to a stop. I stayed secluded, once again settled in the branches of a tree, giving me a clear view of all the giants present. They were seated in a semi-circle, all of them facing their leader, who Nemesis told me was _Antiphates_, king of the Laistrygonians.

_Huge_ was the word to describe him. Standing at least eleven feet tall, Antiphates made all the other giants look like regular mortals. He had long raven black hair that went to his shoulders, held in place by a skeletal crown adorned with jewels, and his whole frame was burly and muscular. He was mostly bare-chested, with a pelt of animal fur draped around the upper half of his torso, along with a necklace of skulls. He was seated on a makeshift throne of stone and furs, and his weapon of choice- an imperial gold axe- was stashed beside him.

I remembered reading about Antiphates in the _Odyssey_, in which he and his people destroyed nearly all of Odysseus' ships and ate his companions. With one mistake after another, I always wondered how Odysseus managed to carry all of those hardships on his own, and still had the strength to return home to his family. I got to admire the guy for pulling through to the end.

I struggled to hear what they were saying. Most of their words were muffled by constant gorging of raw meat. I noticed that the giants were in the midst of preparing the deer they caught earlier. I tried not to vomit at the sight. If I wasn't such a meat lover, I would have turned vegetarian instantly after seeing _that_. I noticed one of the giants took a large plate of food and offered the dish to Antiphates,
"Bland," the King said after swallowing. He threw the piece back onto the dish roughly, startling the giant. "ADD MORE SEASONING! Is this the kind of food you offer to a Lord?!!"

The giant quickly nodded. "R-right away, my Lord."

"Hurry up!" Antiphates grumbled. "If it's not prepared well, you will be the next course!" The giant instantly paled at his threat and nearly tripped over himself in a hurry to prepare the food again.

While the giants followed their King’s orders, my eyes kept its attention on the large blackened pot of cooked meat. I noticed that all the giants had yet to eat their meal. There were too many of them here, too many for a single person to handle. I had to cut their numbers by half.

The pot of food was the answer.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any bottles of toxins on me. I didn't even know which plants were toxic and which had the best effect. That was Clare's field of expertise. I didn't have the time or energy to hunt the whole forest for poisonous plants anyway, so what was I left with?

I sat there thinking for awhile, tracing back everything I've learned since I was under Walt's tutelage. Maybe I could find something useful in the past? I kept reminiscing until I remembered my battle with Lycaon, and then it clicked.

My own blood was poison.

It was a long shot, but I knew my body (and thus my blood) was made of celestial silver. Werewolves feared silver like the plague, and I strongly believed that giants didn't go around eating every celestial metal they found. I didn't have a container, which meant I had to get close enough to the pot to add my blood in, and with so many of them present and right by the pot, I couldn't get close enough unless they left…

"You look like you need something, my Lord."

I nearly jumped out of fright, and I instantly drew Nightwalker at the voice behind me. A dryad, who looked like a young woman in plant apparel, sat at the other end of the branch with a startled, but knowing expression. I sheepishly lowered my weapon.

"What makes you say that?" I said stiffly, not used to being caught off-guard.

"I was watching you," the dryad said, "I tend to watch those who sit in my tree, and you appear very frustrated."

"You're right," I admitted. "You called me 'my lord'. I thought dryads serve Lady Demeter?"

"We do, but we also honor the goddess of the wild, Lady Artemis,“ the dryad said, giving a respectful bow. "It's an honor to meet you at last, my lord. It's not every day one of us meets the child of our venerated Lady."

"I-I see," I said. I lifted a hand to cover my reddened face. "Please, there's no need to address me like that. You must realize I'm not truly a child of your goddess."

"Yes," the dryad easily agreed, much to my surprise. "We've heard of the unique conditions of your birth, Seth Hunter, and I apologize for the mistake, for you are much closer to Lady Artemis than that of a son."
"That's not what I meant…." I trailed off, shaking my head. I needed to get to the issue at hand. "Alright, I may need your help with something."

I whispered the plan to the dryad. When I finished, she nodded immediately.

"It can be done," the dryad said. "My sisters and I are more than willing to help you rid of these monsters. They disturb our peace day after day!"

"I'm glad to hear it," I said, "when I give the signal…." "I understand," the dryad said, bowing once more despite my protests.

I asked, "what is your name, dear dryad?"

The dryad blushed, "Madelyn, my lord."

"Madelyn," I repeated. "Just call me Seth. Okay?"

"Yes, my l- I mean, Seth," Madelyn corrected.

"See? That wasn't so hard," I said with a slight smirk.

Now let's put my plan to the test.

-o-

I knelt beside a large boulder and watched the scene unfold.

Madelyn and couple of her sister dryads came out of the edge of the forest, laughing and dancing about. The sound of their camaraderie instantly gained the attention of all the giants present, who turned to the nature spirits with confused looks. Antiphates, I noticed, gave a look of confusion.

"What are you doing here?" Antiphates questioned. "You nature spirits know better than to interrupt our dinner!"

I noticed Madelyn struggled to keep a smile on her face, "My Lord Antiphates, we've heard news of your arrival, and I thought it is only right that my sisters and I grace you with a dance."

"A dance," the King echoed, like the idea was baffling to him.

"You are a king," Madelyn stated. "I'm sure a royal like you must have had his share of entertainment before and during each meal."

"Of course!" Antiphates said, a smirk spreading across his features. "A dance…now I haven't seen one of those for a long time. Very well, dryad, you and your group may proceed."

"Yes, Lord Antiphates," Madelyn said, quietly signaling the rest of her sisters to give a half-hearted bow. "My sisters and I do love a big audience. I notice some giants in the back, the ones by the cauldron. Do you mind if you call them over, King Antiphates? I fear they may not see us clearly."

"You heard her, men!" Antiphates barked. "Come on over!"

The giants eagerly obeyed their King's order, scrambling to get a good spot to see Madelyn and her sisters' performance, therefore leaving the cauldron of food isolated. Madelyn signaled one of her sisters to play music with her wooden reeds and another with a tambourine, while she sang a lovely song. The giants were quickly enraptured by Madelyn's voice, and her sisters soon started the dance.
Once the music started, I quickly made my way to the pot. My feet moving stealthily to make sure no noise was possible. I quickly drew out Darkhacker after I’d taken off my glove, and with a clenched jaw, I made a cut across the palm of my left hand. I let my bloodied hand linger over the pot for awhile, keeping my narrowed eyes on the giants. I renewed the cut a minute after, my regeneration being a pain in the ass this time around. I needed to make sure the amount was enough to take out at least a dozen seven-foot tall giants.

My head was starting to get a bit dizzy by the time I withdrew my hand. I backed away quietly and into the forest, and climbed back up Madelyn's tree. When I reached my previous spot, I knocked on the branch three times. Madelyn locked eyes with me briefly, telling me she knew of my predicament. The dance quickly drew to a close, and all of the giants whistled and applauded loudly.

"MORE!" Antiphates demanded. "I want to see a second dance!"

Madelyn smiled uneasily. "Soon, my lord. But I remember you said you all were having your dinner? How about after my lord and his men settled down to eat? It's not good if the food goes cold."

Antiphates gave a booming laugh. "Do you hear that? Bring out the main course!"

The giants went towards the pot, and placed the servings into separate plates. I sucked in a breath as the giant took the largest plate to Antiphates. The King of the Laistrygonians took a bite, slowly savored the taste, and then swallowed. I waited anxiously. What if the plan didn't work? What if my blood was only effective to werewolves only?

Antiphates let out a satisfied sigh, much to my dismay. "Now this is what I call food. DIG IN, MEN!"

Oh no…

The giants cheered before each of them devoured their share hastily. I placed my head to my bent knees, so filled with disappointment and the sense of failure that I couldn't meet Madelyn's confused gaze. I guessed I'd need another plan after…!

A loud crash interrupted my thoughts. I looked up to see one of the giants had fallen forward, his face smashing against his food, dead. Seconds later, a second one fell, and then another, and another…

A delayed reaction?

"What is happening?!!" Antiphates shouted, looking at his fallen men in bewilderment. Nearly half of his men had fallen due to 'unknown' causes.

One of his subordinates answered. "They are all dead, my Lord!"

"DEAD?!" he roared. Antiphates got so fed up that he even stood up. Then, as if by an ominous epiphany, Antiphates' eyes snapped in realization. He turned to the dryads vehemently.

"You…" he started, walking towards Madelyn and her sisters, who backed away in fright. "You did something…You did this!"

"Y-you are mistaken," Madelyn said, trembling. Her sisters slowly backed away some more. "W-we didn't! We were dancing, we couldn't have-!"

"Silence!" Antiphates shouted, his eyes drooping slightly. So my blood was affecting him, it just
wasn't enough as I'd feared. His size contributed heavily on the poison's effectiveness. At least, that was what Clare had told me before she went traitor. "You will tell me what's causing this, or we'll tear you apart limb by limb!"

Seeing how the pretense was up, Madelyn dropped the sincerity act and gazed at the Laistrygonian with cold, disgusted eyes. "You and your men are nothing but man-eating animals! An obstruction to the forest! I pray Artemis and Demeter punish you horrendously for your crimes, you foul beast!"

"GUARDS!" Antiphates screamed. "Kill them! Make sure none of their remains are left!"

Before any of his guards could even get one foot closer, I already summoned my bow and arrows, and proceeded to shoot rapid waves at the attackers. Most of my shots killed them instantly, while others were merely injured, but forced to stop their onslaught. Madelyn and her sisters took that moment to flee, and returned back into their natural forms.

I kept firing. At my vantage point, I could kill off each of the defenseless giants at ease. I managed to kill off at least three-fourths of the surviving group (excluding Antiphates unfortunately) before the rest grabbed those troublesome shields and blocked my arrows. I was forced to move when the giants threw their spears randomly at the trees.

"Artemis!" Antiphates shouted, plucking one of the silver arrows out of his arm. I scowled at the address. "You dare defy the ancient laws?! My kin and I have done nothing to warrant this attack! Call off your hunters!"

I scoffed mentally. If only you knew.

I quickly leaped from tree to tree, the rustling noises from my movement caused the giants to swerve back and forth, trying to locate my position. As I neared each giant, I immediately shot at their heads from above. The rest of them tried hard to defend but it was to no avail. My relatively small size allowed me better agility, and accuracy was always my strong point.

Meanwhile, Antiphates was getting extremely aggravated. His face became a bulging red; his eyes so wide I thought he was going to burst open his eyeballs. There were only a couple giants left aside from him, and the remaining giants were all injured from my earlier assault. I quickly changed that fact by launching another five arrows- each of them hitting the remaining giants in the head or neck.

Antiphates was the only one left.

I was startled by how quickly I killed these giants. The poison took out half, and then my surprise attacks halved that number again, and then after moving about and killing them one by one, I managed to isolate my main target. Of course, I wasn't without injuries, but they were minor compared to what I'd gone through, and my breathing was only slightly faster than normal, indicating trivial exhaustion. It also helped that Laistrygonians were stupid, and the obscuring foliage and the dryads' aid were definitely huge favors to me.

I got the upper hand in almost every criterion.

I've gotten stronger, I realized, while staring at my clenched right fist. Thanks to those missions and Walt and Lynetta's help, feats that I had thought impossible in the past were now a certainty. I felt the edges of my lips turn up at that thought.

I positioned my silver bow in attack position, materializing a silver arrow as I pulled the drawstring back. My arrow pointed straight at Antiphates' throat, and I knew that if this arrow hit the desired place, the Laistrygonian King would be dead, and Nemesis' mission would be over. Before I could
carry out this plan however, a rather sadistic thought crossed my mind:

This is too boring.

I could choose to end Antiphates now. The fool didn't even bother to take cover in the trees or even grab a shield like his subordinates. I thought he learned by now, but that arrogance of his really pissed me off. He just stood completely open, confident that that large body of his could take on any damage. The more rational part of my mind started to think: Maybe Antiphates had some trick up his sleeve? Was he baiting me? Or was I just over thinking things? Which was it?!

In the end, I decided to test Antiphates.

Instead of shooting a possible death blow, I materialized three more arrows, releasing four arrows at sonic speed towards Antiphates' legs and arms.

At the very last second, the giant moved.

Antiphates swerved that golden axe of his with such speed his axe only appeared as a yellowish blur. He sliced the arrows going towards his arms first before stepping aside and crushing the remaining two arrows to the ground with a huge slam!

"Come out and fight, you cowards!" Antiphates shouted. "Hiding about and using cheap shots—make you no better than an assassin!"

Despite the insults he was throwing at me, I felt my mood lightening with glee. So Antiphates wasn't a weakling after all. This fact, both good and bad, made me insanely happy. Why? Because my dear friends, I love challenges. There's no fun if the opponent was a weakling. Convenient at times yes, but I wanted Antiphates to be strong, because the stronger he was...

The more satisfaction I get for my revenge.

I'd been waiting for this encounter for nearly three years. All of that dormant and pent up anger suddenly surged through me, and then I did something unexpected.

I laughed.

The sound of my laughter startled Antiphates, predictably. I didn't care that I just gave away my hiding spot. My mind and body were experiencing an emotional high equivalent to that of ex-drunk drinking vodka. To a spectator, I was the very definition of a deranged maniac, but unlike most 'maniacs', my mind was clear and I knew then how I wanted this upcoming match to turn out.

Quite confidently, I leaped down from the tree and stepped into the clearing, my hood still up as I gazed at the Laistrygonian King in the face calmly. I smirked at his confused expression.

"You're not Artemis," Antiphates stated.

"Obviously."

"You killed my men!"

I rolled my eyes. "Duly noted."

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I don't sense anything." He was talking about my aura, which I kept at a minimum, and thereby obscuring my Olympian affiliation.

"My name isn't important," I said, "yet. What's important is..."
I quickly brandished my Stygian Iron daggers in each hand. My smirk disappeared quickly, replaced with cold hatred.

"…is that I get your hide as my new mat!" I hissed before striking.

Antiphates brought his axe up to counter my weapons. We were locked in close combat. True to my observations, Antiphates put up a good fight. He defended well, and used his immeasurable strength to its full potential. If he even managed to get one hit on me, I would be crushed like a bug. Thankfully, I was trained to be fast and agile. My body may not be as muscular as other demigods I knew, but my speed made up that disadvantage.

I leaped high into the air to dodge the giant's swift swerve. I was exhilarated, like I was really living. I haven't felt this passionate for so long that I almost forgotten what it felt like.

As Antiphates threw another wide swerve, I made sure to time it, and the next time it happened…

I crouched low and stabbed my daggers into his feet, forcefully pinning him to the ground. Antiphates let out a scream as I summoned my silver knives and quickly stabbed them deep into his abdomen before pulling them out with a slight twist. Antiphates fell backward, landing flat on his back. His feet remained pierced to the ground, and now I was the one towering over the fallen King.

I stepped on top of him, purposely pushing the sole of my shoes into his wounds. I noticed his right hand still clenching his axe, and so to prevent any troubles, I pinned his right wrist down with my knife. Antiphates let out an agonizing scream, but I ignored it as I dragged the axe out of his reach. Antiphates attempted to take the knife out with his other hand before I sliced a vital tendon and rendered that arm immobile. The giant was spread out on all fours, like an animal stuck in a trap.

I crouched on top of his chest, staring at him with my mask still in place. I took off my hood. "Do you know who I am, Antiphates? Do you recognize this face?"

Antiphates couldn't answer. Of course he couldn't, he wasn't there that night. Some part of me knew that I was heaping all the blame on Antiphates unjustly, but I didn't care. I needed a temporary scapegoat for all the negative emotions I'd contained because my real target was still out of my reach.

"Still don't recognize me?" I said. "Then I'll give you a hint."

I closed my eyes and finally uncapped my aura. The moment I did so, Antiphates' eyes became clouded with recognition.

"You…." he choked. "Y-you are Seth Hunter."

"That's right," I replied. "Your people mercilessly slaughtered my family nearly three years ago. It is also one of your kin that killed my cousin, Lee Fletcher. They are the reason why I'm here now."

"Those deaths have nothing to do with me!" Antiphates argued. "I am not responsible-!"

"What nonsense are you sprouting?!" I interrupted angrily. "You are their King. As ruler, you are responsible for every one of your people's actions! That is what it means to be a leader, Antiphates. To suggest otherwise would be a denouncement to your royal title."

"That is idealistic." Antiphates spat.

"No, it is the ugly truth," I said. "No leader can last long without following through with what I just said. Your kingship is a fraud, Antiphates. You are no King, but a greedy, narrow-minded bully."
"You dare-!" His voice was forcefully silenced when I made a slow, painful cut on his chest. Antiphates clenched his teeth to muffle his scream.

"I've been thinking," I summoned yet another knife, and clashed the two together, as if to sharpen their blades. Antiphates' eyes grew wide with fear. "You monsters always manage to come back at different time intervals. Sometimes it takes a year for you fellas to regenerate, sometimes a month. Other times, it takes a decade. I want to ask you a question, Antiphates. Be sure to answer honestly."

The Laistrygonian only gave me a death glare.

I gave an eerie smile. "Do the times differ because your healing paces are different? Or could it depend on...the severity of your wounds?"

I plunged the knife into the giant's shoulder, Antiphates gave a scream and his agonizing yells only grew louder as I slowly twisted the weapon still embedded in his flesh.

I continued, "you know what? I think I'll go with the second option. By that logic...Wouldn't it be my job to make sure you come back as late as possible?"

That was when I felt Antiphates tremble, his eyes now filled with genuine fear. Tears even started to form in his eyes as I started slashing him this way and that, not caring that my hands and clothes were now stained with blood.

"Kill me!" the giant cried. I momentarily stopped my attacks.

"You want to die?" I questioned. My arms were getting tired. Maybe I should just call it a night.

"P-please kill me!" my adversary pleaded.

Suddenly, I felt drained. I blinked, and it was almost like the scene before me changed. I looked down at my hands...my blood red hands, and then at Antiphates, who was weeping shamelessly.

What in Hades am I doing?

Unable to stand the sight of my broken enemy, I hastily slashed the giant's throat, ending his misery at last. Trembling slightly, I stepped off of the corpse right before it disappeared. I slowly walked over to where my Stygian Iron daggers laid, but before I could even pick them up...

My eyes rolled back, my head faint, and I felt my whole body collapse.

My world turned pitch black.

-o-

Nemesis had been watching.

She watched as her champion mercilessly took out the giants. She watched as he finished off Antiphates in a way so cruel and vindictive it even gave the goddess of revenge a shiver of excitement.

She watched as Seth Hunter suddenly switched from ruthless avenger to horrified teen. The change in persona so swift, it nearly caught her by surprise. But seeing as Nemesis knew what Seth truly was, she had a good idea as to why that behavioral change happened. She watched Seth intently as the boy fell to the ground out of exhaustion.

She materialized onto the scene, her only focus locked on her champion as she knelt beside him. She
carefully picked up his Stygian Iron weapons and placed them on his person before she picked him up, her arms wrapped under the crook of his knees and his back.

She gazed down at her unconscious champion, and a smile spread across her features. Seth Hunter exceeded her expectations. She expected a good show, but not that wonderful, unexpected finale her champion gave her. She knew she made the right choice in offering her patronage to him, and she could only imagine his future feats. Her champion was just full of surprises.

One thing was for certain: Seth Hunter would make her proud.

-o-
When I finally came to, I saw Nemesis.

I didn't know where we were. It was still very dark, but I noticed we were outside still, the ground beneath me was damp, and I felt my back resting against the trunk of a tree. My daggers were on me, and my hands and clothes were cleaned. Were we still in the same forest?

Nemesis noticed I was awake. "Feeling better, Seth?"

I tried to answer, but I couldn't. I was having a severe migraine, and just trying to focus on Nemesis was proving to be difficult. Last night's events came to mind, and for some weird reason, my headache just got even worse as I tried to recall them. It got so bad to the point that I had to put both hands to my head, as if to soothe it. My teeth clenched tightly, my face contorted. Nemesis tilted her head slightly, giving a small smile.

"A headache," Nemesis stated, almost *knowingly*. "Let me help you with that."

She leaned down, the tips of her fingers touched my forehead, and slowly, the pain started to ebb away. I finally let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," I said.

"Do you get headaches often?" she questioned.

I thought about it. "No, I don't get sick easily."

"Really?" she replied. "Can you stand?"

I nodded, and I did just that. My head was feeling normal again, and strength returned to my legs. I noticed the forest ground had bits of sunlight seeping through. "How long was I out, Lady Nemesis?"

"A couple hours," She said. "If you are well enough, I could take you to Walt Forger?"

"That would be…appreciated," I said carefully. Nemesis shot me a grin.

"You still don't trust me," Nemesis said. I remained silent. "What is it about me that you don't trust? Is it my domain?"

"It's nothing personal," I said briskly. "I don't trust deities in general."

"A wise precaution," the goddess complimented, surprising me. "You did not offend me, Seth Hunter. You are entitled to your own choices. Having a cautious individual as my champion adds to my benefit."

I gave a smirk at that. "Do you believe all demigods to be brash?"

"I find demigods annoying," Nemesis muttered. "They are either too arrogant, or too whiny. Both traits displease me greatly."

"What about your children?" I questioned.

Nemesis shrugged. "They are useful tools." She caught my offended look. "Don't be surprised, Seth.
I'm sure you already know how we think. It's the general outlook among the divine. Dedicating our
time and energy to such fleeting existences is meaningless. There are exceptions, but they are very
few."

"I see," I murmured. At least Nemesis wasn't hiding behind weak excuses. She was honest, *brutally
honest*. I could value that. "Do you find me annoying then? I can be whiny and arrogant."

"If I found you annoying, I would not have offered you my patronage," she answered. "Besides, you
are no demigod. You are one of a kind, Seth. I'm surprised some of your friends hadn't figured that
out. When are you going to shed that disguise?"

"Only if I must," I said stiffly. "It's up to me when I want to reveal what I am."

"And do you know who you are, Seth?" Nemesis asked. "Do you know *what* you are?"

I grew irritated. "I thought you were going to take me back? Not play twenty questions."

"I'll take that as a no," Nemesis continued, ignoring my previous statement. I frowned. "Artemis
never gave you a name did she? Or perhaps she didn't know what to call you other than 'clone'."

"And you do?" I shot back.

"I think a better term to describe you would be 'tri-blood'." Nemesis replied. "You're not a demigod,
you are not one of us, and you are certainly no mortal. The only term left would be one that is
between a god and demigod yes?"

"I'm flattered you think so highly of me," I said sarcastically. "But based on your logic, a tri-blood
would be like a child of a demigod and god, which I'm not. I have no mortal blood in me."

Nemesis raised an eyebrow. "Would you rather be called a clone?" I scowled. "I said it was a *better*
term, not an accurate one."

"Can we please get going?"

"Patience, my champion," Nemesis said. "You have not received your reward from me."

"Reward?" I said warily.

"Of course," Nemesis smiled. "You did a *superb* job on the mission I gave you. It's only right you
get a gift from me." She extended a hand. "Give me your right hand."

Hesitantly, I moved my right hand forward, the one with the tattoo on my wrist. I didn't know what
Nemesis was about to do. The goddess took my hand, and she pressed her left fingers against the
tattoo gently. Her hand started to glow, and I felt wisps of her energy going into me through the
contact. She let go of my hand a moment later.

Seeing my questioning look, Nemesis explained. "Do you remember the *exact* location of where you
placed your bow?"

"Yes…" I recalled it was placed on my bed at Walt's. Why was she asking this?

"Try imagining your bow being *here*."

I widened my eyes slightly at the implication, before following what she said. I closed my eyes, and
a moment later, I heard a solid *thump* beside me. I opened my eyes, and behold: my bow was on the
ground *next* to me. I picked it up quickly, examining the carvings I made to indicate its ownership.
"It only works with small objects, like weapons." Nemesis clarified. "You must have a good memory of where you last left the object you desire. If it's even an inch off, the object you want will not come, and it must be an object you have come in contact with. Distance isn't an issue. Of course, you can't summon everything—like our weapons of power. It will be troublesome if Zeus' master bolt goes missing again. It's much like how you summon your celestial silver weapons, Seth, only with other things. I'm sure you will find this trick useful."

I stared at the bow in amazement. Nemesis was right. This new trick was definitely a great advantage. "I… I don't know what to say."

Nemesis only smiled. "Just continue to fulfill the requests I give you as entertaining as you did before." I felt a chill go down my spine. My memories were still hazy. She extended her hand yet again, "Shall we go?"

I closed my eyes, and a large gulf of light enclosed my whole figure as Nemesis and I left the forest without a trace.

-o-

"Where were you?" Walt shouted as I got in. Nemesis had already left.

"I was completing a mission," I told him.

"Mission?" Walt echoed incredulously. "You mean a mission I had no information of. You even left your communication device behind!"

"Walt, I'm sorry, but it was only for one day!" I exclaimed. "I knew I will come back much sooner than usual!"

"Who assigned it?" Walt interrupted, which was a first. He hated interruptions. "Which god gave this mission to you?"

I hesitated. "It was… Nemesis."

"Nemesis…" Walt repeated, and said to himself, "the goddess of revenge, retribution, and balance, and daughter of the Primordial, Nyx—That Nemesis? She knew the agreement! Every god is supposed to go through me before taking my students out on missions! Even Artemis knew that! Why did she not…?"

He trailed off, narrowing his eyes at me, realizing something. "Unless… she had priority?" I struggled to keep a neutral countenance. I didn't tell anyone that Nemesis was my patron. "Hunter, are you keeping something from me?"

I said carefully. "Nothing that is too concerning."

"Well, it's now my concern!" Walt exclaimed. "Do you realize the situation you put me and Lynetta in, Hunter? I am sworn to look after yours and every one of my students' well being while under my instruction! That includes knowing where you are at all times! If Artemis knew about this, she has the right to do to me as she sees fit!"

"I didn't know, okay?" I replied stiffly. "You didn't tell me any of this!" Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Lappy and Lynetta coming up the stairs, wondering what got Walt in such a jumble.
"Now you do," Walt said, calming down a bit, much to my relief. "Hunter, please enlighten me. Don't even think of hiding whatever it is you are hiding. Why did Nemesis have priority?"

I sighed, rubbing my temple absentmindedly. "She's... It's because she's my patron."

There was a brief moment of silence as Walt, Lynetta, and Lappy allowed the information to sink in. "That would explain it," Lynetta whispered, breaking the silence.

"When did this happen?" Walt asked.

"It was when I first encountered her in Boston," I reminded. "I told you how I met her."

"Yet you didn't bother to mention her patronage to you, why?" Walt demanded.

"I didn't think it was important..." I quickly rephrased when I noticed Walt's irritated glance. "I know it is now, but I thought maybe keeping it a secret would be more advantageous for me."

_Do you realize the significance of what you've agreed to?_ Lappy finally commented.

"I know what having a patron means, Lappy," I said aloud. "Nemesis will serve as my benefactor, and in return, I will complete the tasks she assigns me."

_And in order of importance, Nemesis replaces Artemis._ Lappy informed me.

I crossed my arms. "Yeah, so?"

_You're actually okay with this?!_ Lappy said incredulously.

"Sure I am," I said to the shocked beagle. "I don't need Artemis for anything, Lappy. She has her hunters to worry about. Why are you so upset? I'm doing Artemis a favor, Lappy. I have someone else to look out for me other than her, and I got you."

_You trust Nemesis more than Artemis?_

"No," I answered. "I don't trust either of them, but I at least got Nemesis on a sacred oath. So I know she won't purposely harm me."

"Careful there, Seth," Lynetta spoke up. "Your definition of 'harm' could be different in Nemesis' point of view."

"I know," I told her, "which is why I don't trust her a bit. Are we done-?"

_I smell blood._

I inwardly winced, struggling not to break contact with Lappy's stern gaze. I should have asked Nemesis for a new set of identical clothes! There was no fooling Lappy's sense of smell. I was too careless. Walt, who couldn't hear Lappy's thoughts thankfully, saved me from answering.

"You may go after you give me your report," Walt said. "I want every single detail. Don't leave anything out."

So I did. I told him how I poisoned the giants' food, got the dryads' help, and how I finished Antiphates off. I lied about how I dealt his death though, saying how I shot him to death with arrows (which **was** my original intention). I also mentioned Nemesis' reward for me, which got Walt to ask more questions. Fortunately, Walt seemed to buy the whole story, and I was finally allowed to return.
to my room and rest for the day.

Lappy followed me upstairs. I wanted to slam the door behind me to keep the beagle out, but Lappy had better ideas. He ran ahead of me, so he was on my bed before I even reached the door. I tried not to scowl at his unwanted presence.

Once I closed the door, I dumped the bow and daggers on my desk before taking off my hoodie, leaving only my bare chest, before running the water in the bath. The beagle watched me carefully. I threw a forced smirk.

"What? You can't let me change by myself?"

_Since when did you care about that?_ Lappy said back with narrowed eyes. _I know you are lying, Seth. The question is, why?_

"I'm not lying." I said easily. "I met a dryad by the name of Madelyn, who helped me distract the giants while I poisoned the food."

_Don't take me for a fool!_ Lappy growled. I raised an eyebrow at his temper. _If you really took out Antiphates with arrows, the scent of blood would not be this strong! Even now, I can still smell blood on you, Seth Hunter!_

"I was firing at close range." I fabricated. "I never knew giants bled so easily."

_Seth…_ Lappy started, not convinced.

I snapped. "What else do you want me to say, Lappy?! I may have exerted myself when I was taking out the _trash_! It's nothing to worry about!"

_I will determine what's worrying or not, and in this case, it is._ Lappy said. _You…were so calm before your friend's funeral. Could it be because of his death that you lost control over your emotions?_

"I…" I started awkwardly, startled by Lappy's insight. I caught myself quickly. "I don't want to talk about it. I need to take a bath-!"

_Your bath can wait-!

"No, _this_ can wait!" I said forcefully. "Artemis gave you to me, not the other way around! When I said I don't want to talk about it, _I mean it_!"

Lappy droop his eyes, apologetic. I was trying hard not to succumb to those puppy dog eyes. _I-I spoke out of place. Please forgive me…master._

I flinched at the distant term, "Lappy, I thought I told you not to…" The beagle only shifted on my bed, so his back was facing me. I grew irritated at his clear dismissal, "Fine! Don't talk to me! See if I care!"

I slammed the bathroom door loudly, my head pounding from my burst of anger. I leaned against the bathroom door a few minutes to calm down.

_Breathe in, breath out. Repeat._

A few minutes later, I was submerged in the bath. I sighed contently.

_What is with Lappy these days? Always getting on my case!_ I scoffed mentally. _I can't believe I lost my temper to a dog…_
I tried shaking the memories of the encounter off, not wanting to be troubled by them.

*Could it be because of his death...that you lost control over your emotions?*

I gritted my teeth. My emotions...Athena had told me herself that they were my fatal flaw. Was it true? Was Lappy right? Was it because of Lee's death, that whatever happened last night was the result? I didn't remember being so...

I shivered, and decided my bath was over. I quickly dried myself and put on a new set of fresh clothes. I gave a quick glance at the beagle still lying on my bed, wondering if I should try to strike up a conversation with the stubborn mutt. That thought left my mind, my pride not permitting me. I left the door slightly open for Lappy, before I went downstairs to the music room.

It was roughly two hours later when Lynetta decided to have a little chat with me.

I was still in the middle of playing. My eyes never once leaving the music sheets even as I heard the door shut behind her. I was in the middle of playing Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 - Andante, and before that, I was playing Brahms' Lullaby, Bach's Toccata in D minor, along with the infamous *Flight of the Bumblebee* - all of them were previous pieces I learned during my time here.

She applauded when I finished. I gave a slight upturn of the lips to signify my thanks, my mind momentarily clear and my heart felt relieved.

"It's been a while since I saw you in here," Lynetta commented. I nodded.

"Blame Artemis," I muttered. "First, she kidnapped me and I couldn't play for a week or so. Then, Athena showed up with her little plans, so we were all busy with that. There was Will and Lee's funeral to attend to, with Nemesis at the end. So yeah, piano was pushed to the back of my schedule."

"What got you to play again?" she asked curiously. I stiffened.

"I may have...received a reminder from Lappy," I said honestly. "It's a free day so I thought I practice the old pieces."

"You haven't lost your touch," Lynetta said. "It's nice to hear some good music in this house again. Anyway, Seth, I noticed you have been...a little off lately. Is everything alright?"

"It's been fine."

"Really?" she prodded. "If that's so, then why is your dog not speaking to you?" I narrowed my eyes at her deduction. "I may not be able to communicate with Lappy like you can, but even I (and Mr. Forger) could tell something's going on."

I sighed. "We got into a quarrel. He...didn't like the way I did things on Nemesis' mission. He's also bitter about how I chose Nemesis as my patron without saying anything."

"Ah, that's understandable," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "Of course it is. Lappy is Artemis' familiar. He would take her side."

Lynetta sat down next to me on the bench after I scooted over. "He's just trying to look out for you, Seth. I'm sure you know that. Lady Artemis gave him that duty."

"There's a fine line between looking out for and putting a nose in people's business." I replied back.
"I made sure Lappy knew the difference, and now he refuses to even look at me."

"I see," she murmured. "I just went to talk to Mr. Forger, and we both agree that you should visit Camp Half-Blood." I gave a look of surprise.

"You guys want me to visit camp," I repeated, "but what about Athena's task? We still have one more place to do."

"We can do it after you return," Lynetta said. "My mother also wanted you to give Chiron those papers, remember? I'm sure she won't be offended."

"When can I go?"

Lynetta gave a brief smile. "Any time you are ready."

-o-

The next morning, I was already hauling my stuff into Lynetta's Prius.

If Lynetta or Will didn't mention it, I would never have realized how much I missed seeing Camp Half-Blood. I'd been at Walt's for eight months without seeing anyone other than the Apollo Cabin, and that encounter was only a few hours. I was excited beyond measure, and I eagerly packed up the night before and grabbed onto Lynetta's offer to drive me there.

Lappy heard me packing up, and without a word, he also jumped into the backseats of the car. I raised an eyebrow at the beagle, surprised that he was willing to come with me after our quarrel. He still didn't talk to me, but decided to stay by my side at all times.

Just like what Artemis ordered him to do.

I refrained from saying anything to him too, thus continuing our silent battle. Lynetta started the car, and our trip to New York was mostly silent. Lynetta turned on the radio to listen to pop songs while I gazed at the window blankly. Lappy slept most of the way.

Long Island came into view. Before I could take my bags out of her car, Lynetta asked a favor.

"Can you please not mention me to anyone?" she said quietly.

"Okay…" I said slowly, "but why?"

Lynetta's eyes were downcast. "I've been gone for nearly a decade, Seth. I never bothered to come back here, and I hope to change that on my own. I'll tell Chiron myself where I've been. It's a way for me to…move on?"

"Sure Lynetta," I agreed. "I won't mention you."

Lynetta gave a nod of thanks, before she drove off. Lappy and I walked up Half-Blood Hill, and I gave a grin when I saw the familiar dragon guarding Thalia's tree. The dragon was awake, but it didn't move. I wasn't a threat.

"Nice to see you again, big guy," I muttered. "How are you doing?" The dragon, as if it heard me, gave a loud snort before adjusting its hands to lay its head.

The patrol guards noticed me and asked me to stop for awhile. I gave them my name and Cabin number as procedure, and they let me pass shortly after one of them recognized me.
No one noticed me walk by. Many of them were occupied by their daily classes or were in deep conversation. I also noticed how the Hephaestus and Athena kids were in the midst of repairing a lot of damage. I passed the Big House and the Volleyball courts, which were mostly empty. I walked some more until I reached the Cabins. It was only when I was about to enter my own cabin, I finally heard a familiar voice.

"Seth?" I turned and saw Annabeth Chase, who closed the book she was reading with a snap. She was reading on the front steps of the Athena Cabin, which was right next to mine. "You're back!"

She came up to give me a brief hug, and I let her. Lappy stood by my feet, watching closely.

"Hey Annabeth," I said. "Long time no see."

"No kidding," she said, releasing me from her grasp. "It's been so long since we talked you know? When was the last time we had a conversation anyway?"

"I believe it was during the party at Olympus," I recalled. I gave a sheepish smile. "You look like you're free."

"For a little while," she said with a smile. "Where were you this whole time? I thought it was a coincidence that I didn't see you during my last two visits."

"I…I can't tell," I said slowly. "I'm sorry, and-!"

"Hunter, you little shit!" I closed my eyes and held in my breath as an irritated daughter of Ares stalked up to me.

"H-hey Clarisse," I replied. "I was about to go see you."

"You better have a good reason for bailing!" Clarisse growled, rounding up on my personal space. I tried not to appear intimidated. "You still owe me a new bow and 50 drachmas for the spear and combat training! You also owe my brothers Russell and Jacob archery lessons that are long overdue!"

"Can you please back off?" I said quietly. "Give me some space to breathe?" Clarisse took a step back as I opened one of my bags, and tossed her a large bag of drachmas. She caught it easily. "That's 100 drachmas there. I have your bow halfway done and I can give it to you by tomorrow afternoon. My schedule's a bit full, so tell your brothers to meet me at 6 am at the archery range tomorrow, or they will have to wait even longer. You got all that?"

Clarisse only tossed the big bag of drachmas in the air like a ball, throwing me a smirk. "Not bad, Hunter. I'll let my brothers know."

I rolled my eyes as Clarisse left with her drachmas, leaving me and Annabeth alone again.

"Sounds like you aren't so free tomorrow," Annabeth commented. "100 drachmas, Seth? You're too generous."

"Perhaps," I said. "But if that is what it will take to have Clarisse and her siblings to keep tutoring me and remain in their good graces, then I'll gladly pay it."

"Clarisse isn't known to get along with just anyone. You also said you were making her a new bow? I thought she detested archery."

I nodded. "I didn't have that many drachmas back then, so I offered up my archery talent instead. I
persuaded her that archery can be just as advantageous as a sword, and I guess she's learning it only to show up the Apollo Cabin.

If you thought the Athena and Ares Cabins had a rivalry going, the one between Ares and Apollo Cabins was even worse. Their one main difference was their preferred weapons, and their parents never got along too well either. Ares kids accused Apollo kids of being cowardly, since archery was a long-range weapon, while my cousins called them violent-obsessed brutes. It just so happened that my method of payment served to bridge the gap: I volunteered to give any Ares kid the option of having archery lessons that came with a free hand-made bow in exchange for personal training.

Annabeth was impressed. "I didn't think anyone could change Clarisse's mind, and definitely not her whole cabin. What is it like teaching them?"

I thought about it. "It wasn't easy at first. Most didn't have the patience required, and they only wanted the free weapon. A few lessons in, they got better and their interest increased with their improvement. I started with two students. Now, a majority of the Cabin are participating after I uh, offered to be a sparring partner."

In other words, I volunteered to be their spare punching bag. A task every camper dreaded, especially during unarmed combat classes. To do so willingly was unheard of, which was why so many of the Ares kids gave my lessons a try. Ares kids were the best fighters, so my own skills in unarmed fighting (and healing) also improved after each match. Looking back, it was a good deal despite the unavoidable pain I had to go through.

"You would do that?" Annabeth said incredulously. She shook her head, not believing it. "How could you have so much tolerance for them, Seth?"

"They're really not that bad once you get to know them," I told her. "They just...have trouble expressing themselves assertively. I mean, you and Clarisse seem okay."

She shrugged. "I guess." She noticed my bags. "I shouldn't keep you out here too long. We're having Cabin inspection today."

"Inspection?" I exclaimed. No wonder I didn't see many campers out. "Why did it have to be today? Who's doing the inspecting?"

"Silena Beauregard."

I felt my face plummet. Silena was one of the worst inspectors. A daughter of Aphrodite, she liked things that were 'pretty'. I didn't do 'pretty', and I was really unsure of her thoughts about me. She didn't talk to me much, and she didn't express any hate towards me despite Artemis being who she was to me. But her lack of a response kept me uneasy. Hence, why I was dreading the upcoming piles of dishes I might have to wash at the lava pit. I just hoped that Artemis' Cabin wasn't in too bad of a shape after having an eight month vacancy. Maybe Hermes Cabin will get last place again.

"I better get started then," I said hurriedly. "I still need to unpack. Is Percy still here? What about Grover?"

"They're here," Annabeth answered. "Tyson also came by this summer."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I'll tell them you're here. They're busy with cleaning right now. We'll meet at the pavilion?"
"Sure thing," I said, picking my stuff back up. "Nice seeing you, Annabeth, and great job on leading the Quest, by the way."

She smiled. "It's great to have you back."

At last, I finally entered my cabin. I dropped my bags by the door, and scrutinized every inch of the place. Everything was placed exactly how I left it. The beds were already done beforehand, but my eyesight caught the amount of dust coating every single thing. I also noticed that there was still trash left in the bin, and wood scraps from Clarisse's intended bow were scattered all over my desk. The clothes I had left behind were left in half-opened drawers, and did I just see spider-webs?!

Oh my gods, I'd been living in a pigsty.

I felt Lappy walk past me. He was so quiet during my conversation with Annabeth. I almost forgot he was with me.

"Lappy," I announced, not caring if he's answering or not. "Let's start cleaning."

---

It must have been hours when Will finally dropped by.

I was in the middle of clearing the transparent ceiling with a broom, swapping away the dust and spider webs. The son of Apollo knocked on the door lightly just as a cloud of dust landed on my face and caused me to sneeze.

"ACHOO!" I squeezed my eyes shut as I blindly grabbed a tissue to wipe away the snot. I set the broom down the wall as I grabbed another tissue to blow my nose some more.

"You need a hand there?" he asked, still outside.

I shook my head, opening my eyes wearily. I jumped off the desk I was using. "I'm fine. You guys done with cleaning?"

"Uh-huh, everyone's about to go to Mess Hall." Will informed me. He took a peek inside. "You look like you're about done too."

"Just some last touches," I said, and then I said, "I, Seth Hunter, allow Will Solace to enter Cabin 8."

A moment later, Will stepped inside my cabin, taking a look around. He noticed Clarisse's bow, and picked it up gently.

"You finished it?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not yet. Clarisse wants her bow polished with red paint. I'll need to ask Annabeth or Katie later for art supplies."

"It's really nice," he said softly. "I'll never know how you handle those Ares kids, Seth."

"You can start by not patronizing them with your archery skills."

"They started it!" Will protested. "No one calls me or my siblings 'cowards' without facing dire consequences!"

"You do know that's what they want," I replied. "Go above their taunting, Will. Don't lower yourself to their level. You're more mature than that."
"You make it sound easy," Will grumbled. Then, he noticed Lappy seated on my bed. His face lit up with excitement. "What's this? You got a dog and you didn't tell me?!" He knelt down and tried to beckon Lappy to come over. I threw Lappy a look, and the beagle slowly crawled into Will's arms at my urging.

"I love beagles," Will said, "I always wanted a dog of my own."

"His name's Lappy," I said. "He's not my dog, but Artemis'."

"Artemis?" he questioned. "Why would she give you her dog? I thought you guys didn't get along?"

I stiffened. I almost forgot I was supposed to keep the reconciliation a secret. "We don't. She just sent him along to look out for me. I don't have anything against Lappy."

*Except with what happened earlier.*

Will let Lappy down. "Come on, Seth! You can clean later. Let's go eat! I'm starving!"

"Alright, alright," I said hurriedly. I quickly tossed on the orange Camp T-shirt over my long-sleeved navy shirt. "Let's get those burgers!"

---

The pavilion was nearly full when Will and I walked in. I was greeted by many old acquaintances and friends before I could even sit down. Many of them asked where I'd been while others recanted the Battle of the Labyrinth, causing Will to stiffen beside me, the memory of Lee's death still fresh in his mind. Noticing his discomfort, I quickly told them that I'd catch up with them later after our meal. Percy and Tyson were at the Poseidon Table with Grover. Will joined his siblings after I excused myself.

"Mind if I join in?" I said casually. Percy and Grover looked up, and realizing it was me, they quickly put a halt to their conversation. Tyson, who was seated on Percy's other side, looked like he was playing with his food.

"Dude," Percy started, giving a friendly fist bump. "It's been forever."

Grover grinned. "You missed out on so many things!"

"I heard," I said. "The *Battle of the Labyrinth* right? You guys were on the Quest with Annabeth too. It must have been a struggle. Is it true that Daedalus sacrificed his life in the end?"

"Yeah," Percy answered. "I'm still trying to get over that. Everything just happened so fast."

"You got to meet my girlfriend!" Grover suddenly announced. I was surprised.

"You have a girlfriend?"

Grover appeared giddy. "She's a dryad named Juniper. She's the *sweetest* girl I've ever met! You got to meet her!"

"She's very cute!" Tyson chimed in. "Girl very good to goat boy!"

"If you say so," I said, and then I remembered my earlier promise. "H-hey Tyson…I don't know if Percy told you before…"

Percy answered. "I did."
"Right," I started awkwardly. Tyson was now staring at me intently. "So, um, I'm really sorry about earlier Tyson. I wasn't in a good state of mind. If you want, we uh, you know, could start over and maybe be friends?"

Tyson suddenly stood up, his massive height making me feel very small. Did I say something wrong? Why was he getting up?!

"Friend?" he said in a whisper. "You want to be friend to me?"

I nodded quickly, forcing a relaxed smile. "Yes, Tyson. If you want to, but I'll understand if you don't-!

Tyson suddenly lunged forward and wrapped his arms around mine, and to my horror, picked me up like a stuffed animal for everyone to see. Grover and Percy snorted in laughter.

"Friend! Friend!" Tyson exclaimed. "I made new friend! Sephy is now friend to me!"

_Sephy?_

"He called him 'Sephy'!" Grover snickered to Percy, who was now hollering loudly at my expense.

"P-put me down!" I said shakily, my face burning in embarrassment. I struggled to get out, but my arms were stuck to my sides. I heard laughter coming from all sides of the pavilion as Tyson hugged me tightly, making me choke. "You big oaf-I mean, Tyson! Right, Tyson, please put me down right now!"

"I am happy!" Tyson said as he set me back down on the ground. "Very happy!"

I wanted to stay angry at the Cyclops. Tyson had just embarrassed me by treating me like a little child in front of everybody while giving me a girly nickname! Did I mention that I didn't like being touched? But after I noticed the jovial look on Tyson's face, I just sighed and shook my head, my hand raised to cover a small, light smile.

"So Sephy," Percy grinned. "How have you been?"

"Yeah," Grover said between snickers. "Please tell us, Sephy."

I only gave the two idiots a mock-glower. "Don't even think about it, unless you want me to reveal all the dirty little secrets I got from you two."

Percy only laughed. "Quit bluffing, Sephy. You got nothing."

"Oh? Then I'll start with you Percy," I smirked. "Annabeth will be dying to know who put that rubber spider in the Athena Cabin as a joke. After all, it wasn't the Stolls' fault like they thought."

The son of Poseidon paled. "I couldn't back out from a dare!"

"And as for you, Grover," I said, "I don't think your girlfriend would think you 'charming' after hearing your display of love and devotion to Lady Artemis last winter."

Grover's grin disappeared. "N-not cool. Not cool at all, Seth."

I smiled. "I'm glad we understand each other. I like to stay some more to chat, but I've a bacon cheeseburger waiting for me. See you guys!"

I gave each of them a pat on the shoulder before walking away with a smirk on my face. I heard
"When did Seth get so good at blackmail?"

"I don't want to know," Grover answered shakily. "But let's watch ourselves from now on, okay?"

Meanwhile, Tyson continued to smile like Christmas came early.

-0-

After much catching up with Will, Travis, and Connor, I also paid a visit to Demeter Cabin, and I struck up a long friendly conversation with Katie and Miranda Gardner. Sometime in the middle, I also asked them to borrow some organic red paint, and the two sisters agreed easily. Lappy continued to follow me around, much to the girls' delight. Lappy was considered a very adorable 'puppy', and beagles just had that look to them that made people, especially girls, want to hug them.

Silena finally came by to do the monthly inspection. Again, she didn't say anything to me as she scrutinized every inch of my cabin, marking little notes on that clipboard. In the end, I didn't have anything to worry about since Hermes Cabin did get last place again, making my earlier prediction correct.

I worked on Clarisse's new bow for a while, making sure the coating was thick and smooth. It was finally completed, needing a whole night to dry, before I went to sleep at last.

The next morning, I woke up at 5:30 sound and quickly prepared my long overdue archery lesson with Clarisse's brothers, who needed the most help. It was after I finished training them that I was interrupted.

"See you, Hunter," Russell said. "Thanks for the help!"

"Just keep working on your aim," I told him. "You're almost there."

"Hey, Seth!" Reeve called to me, walking over with a new bow and quiver of arrows. "I heard from Will that you arrived yesterday afternoon."

"Reeve?" I said. "When did you arrive? Where's your sister?"

"A week ago," Reeve answered. "Caroline's not here with me. She decided to join the Hunters. Coach Hedge says hi if I see you."

"Likewise," I said slowly. "You feeling okay? I mean, having Caroline leave you like that…"

"I'm fine," he said, "as long as Artemis and the Hunters take care of her, I don't mind."

"I see," I said. "Do you need the archery range? I just finished using it."

"Actually," Reeve said nervously. "I was wondering if you can give me some tips. Apollo just claimed me three days ago, and apparently, I'm supposed to be an archery whiz? I tried it, but Will overpowered me easily."

"Archery is a process, Reeve," I told him. "I had trouble too the first time. Being a natural at archery means that you have a high affinity to it, not that you will get it automatically. Here, I'll give you a demonstration."

I held the bow with my left hand, so the bow was facing him. "The angle you pull the drawstring determines the power. You must make sure your feet are spread apart evenly so you won't stumble
after the arrow's released." I grabbed an arrow and set it up. "Make sure your arm is at 180 degrees, and see that target there? It's about 20 feet away." Reeve nodded, trying to copy my example. "Since the distance isn't too far, you only need to pull the arrow back about this much, and then…"

I released the arrow swiftly, and it hit the center mark. I lowered my bow and smirked at Reeve's gaping face. This kid reminded me of Percy's reaction when he first saw me do archery.

"I want to try!" Reeve said eagerly.

Reeve did make progress. His aim was still a little off, but he will perfect it with practice. I recalled how I still needed to speak with Chiron and hand him the papers. Will and Austin soon joined us at the archery range, and we were having a free for all.

"Oh no, you don't!" Will said seriously, seeing the scoreboard. I was currently in the lead by two points. "I'm done with you coming on top, Seth! I haven't been polishing my skills these last eight months only to let you beat me again!"

"Bring it on, Will!" I shouted encouragingly.

Will concentrated hard, and his last two shots came out perfect, ending our match as a tie. "Whoohoo! I finally beat Seth Hunter-!"

"It's a tie, Will," I corrected. The son of Apollo only stuck his tongue at me childishly, not caring for the difference. I rolled my eyes and chuckled slightly at his enthusiasm. "Let's call it a day alright?"

"Come hang out at our cabin, Seth," Austin said. "Pollux got us some really nice drinks-!"

"What kind of drinks?" I interrupted. "Not alcohol I hope?"

Austin rolled his eyes. "Like Mr. D would let his son do that. It's only Tropical punch and soda, Seth. Nothing harmful. We also got whip cream cake!"

My attention shot up at that. "Whip cream cake?! Seriously?"

"Yup!"

"Let's go!" I said hastily. "I want a piece!"

"You better save us some, Seth!" Will warned.

All of us gathered our things, and walked back to the Cabins cheerfully. Will was still rubbing it in my face about how he had 'beaten' me at archery at last with his newest half-brother, Reeve Rayler. Kayla didn't participate in the archery free for all, but was in the midst of petting Lappy in her arms. I was in the middle of listening to Austin's joke, when an Aphrodite girl walked up to us, or more specifically, me.

"Hold it, Austin," I said before directing my attention to the dark-haired girl. "Do you need something from me?"

"Um yes," she started, eying my cousins warily. "Do you mind if we be somewhere more… private?"

I raised an eyebrow at the strange request. Was it something important? "Um, okay."

I quickly excused myself from the Apollo campers as I followed the girl to the edge of the woods. It was rather isolated here, and the lake glistened from the sun's rays, making the scene beautiful and
serene.

"So," I started, "what do you want?"

The girl smiled coyly. "I like you Seth. Will you like to go out with me?"

-o-
Halcyon Days

I like you Seth. Would you like to go out with me?

There were a million things going through my head. A girl, a perfectly sane girl as far as I could tell, actually expressed an interest in me. I didn't know whether to feel flattered or terrified. Was this some trick? Was it genuine? This was one of Aphrodite's daughters too. I should refuse her outright, but despite these thoughts going through my head, all I said out loud was the classic answer:

"Huh?"

Real intelligent there, Seth, the voice mocked. I ignored it.

"I like you Seth," the girl said again to make sure I heard correctly. "I wish that you go out with me."

"W-wait, hold on," I said, putting a hand forward to prevent the girl from getting any closer to me. "I…I don't get it. I don't know you."

"It's okay," the girl said, smiling. I noticed she had blue eyes, really pretty blue eyes. "If you agree to date me, I'll let you know everything you want about me, Seth."

I was even more confused. This was a thing? What happened to being friends first and then possibly dating later? What was wrong with the world?

"Um, what is it about me that you like?" I started, testing her.

The girl blushed, "I-I think you're very good-looking."

My mind gave an angry retort. Looks!? Ha! How about you go ask Artemis for a date instead?!

I struggled not to grimace. I got really ticked off when people mentioned anything about my appearance. I understood how Artemis is a beautiful goddess, and Apollo is also one of the best looking gods. Genetically, you can visualize what the outcome was, but it's an outcome I found irritating because it's always comparing me, the inferior-no-idea-what-I-am-besides-a-clone, to a goddess. It was a pet peeve I made sure all my close friends knew and didn't speak of in front of me.

Unaware of my troubled thoughts, the girl continued, "…you're athletic, and a great archer. You're very polite and friendly too. I thought with those traits, you make a really good boyfriend."

I should have expected this shallow answer. She was saying good things about me, but it was stuff that anyone at camp would have noticed. There was nothing skin-deep, mainly because this girl didn't know anything personal about me. She only liked what I decided to reveal. I knew instantly that if this girl knew about my hidden flaws, she would turn the other way so fast before I could blink.

"I'm sorry," I stated calmly, "but I'm not comfortable dating someone I don't know. I don't even know your name-!"

"It's Serena," she interrupted, "but Seth, you wouldn't know if you don't try! Just give me a chance! I promise I'll make a really good girlfriend!"

She was starting to sound borderline desperate, which gave me a very bad feeling.

"I'm sorry, Serena," I repeated, "I'm not changing my mind. I don't have time for relationships right
now, and I'm leaving camp again in a few days. I don't think long-distance relationships work either."

"Are you saying I'm not good enough for you?" she said incredulously. I stared at her in disbelief.

*Whoa, where did she get that from?! Girls are so complicated.*

"I didn't say that-!" I broke off abruptly when Serena suddenly walked over, and put her hands on my shoulders, grasping them firmly. "*W-what are you doing-?!*

"Look at me, Seth," she said steadily, her undertone sounded deadly. "They say opposites attract. Just because our parents are enemies doesn't mean we have to be! Do you think I'm pretty?"

What I was thinking about was how to get you *off* me. I was fighting back the urge to push Serena away from me out of courtesy. She was intruding on my personal space and *touching* me. I hate being touched by strangers!

"Yes, you're very pretty," I said through clenched teeth, only giving a brief glance. "Do you mind letting go of me?"

"So what's the problem?" Serena pushed. "Why are you refusing me?"

The look of contempt and disbelief on my face was immeasurable. Did Serena completely disregard what I just said earlier? Even if I was remotely interested in her, I wasn't now. I didn't need a self-centered and not to mention, *rude* girl like her around me.

"I already said..."

"*HEY!*" a voice interrupted. Serena jumped in fright and I took that moment to back away from her, using my hands to 'dust' my shoulders. My eyes spotted Nico Di Angelo. "He already told you he wasn't interested! Are you dense or are you *stupid*?"

Serena stared at Nico in contempt. "This is none of your business, *little boy!* It's between Seth and me-!"

"Actually," I cut in, "Nico is right. I don't have any interest in you- now or ever. Sorry."

Serena looked from me and then Nico before she let out a yell of aggravation, and proceeded to stomp her way out haughtily. I turned to look at Nico gratefully.

"Thanks, Nico," I said, "I'm sorry I got you involved."

"No sweat," he muttered, putting his hands in his pockets. "You're too nice, Seth. If you don't like her, just say so! Girls like her need to hear the 'no' up front or they just keep pushing! That kindness will let people take advantage of you."

I gave a mental scoff. *If only he knew how unkind I could be...*

"I was going to," I replied, "you just beat me to it."

Nico rolled his eyes, "sure."

"Still," I started. "Wasn't that kind of mean? You could have phrased it better. No need to insult their intelligence."

"Are you kidding?" he said. "That girl got what she deserved. You should thank me for saving you
from their little game."

I was confused. "What are you talking about? What game?"

Nico looked incredulous. "You don't know? It's been around camp-!"

"I haven't been here for the last eight months," I pointed out hastily. "I just arrived yesterday."

"Oh yeah," he said, remembering, and then he explained. "Basically, the Aphrodite Cabin has this game they call 'Who can break the most hearts!'" I felt my face freeze up. "It's like their initiation. That girl you saw? She just got accepted into their Cabin a few days ago, and she's trying to get 'in' apparently. I was walking by once, and I overheard a group of them gathering names- names of targets." Nico stopped briefly to see my reaction, he almost appeared sympathetic. "You get the picture."

"So these targets," I said slowly, emotionless. "How do they pick them?"

Nico started fingering them off. "Relationship status is number one I think: so any person who's already taken is out. Age, looks, and experience are considered, and the last one I heard is parentage."

"So I fulfilled all their requirements," I stated sardonically. "Am I their grand prize?"

" Probably," he answered.

I was speechless. I had no idea such a sick and demeaning game was going on around here. I hate Aphrodite, but I was willing to spare her children from that hate because they didn't do anything to me personally; to blame them was like blaming me for Artemis' downfalls. It wasn't their fault they had a bitch for a mother. If what Nico was telling me was true, this changed my thoughts significantly.

"You're not lying," I tested. "Are you?"

"No!" Nico exclaimed, offended from my doubt. "Why would I? Just ask around! I'm sure your friends will know. I'm just trying to warn you, Seth. Make sure you guard your heart, and hold onto it tightly. Otherwise, you might lose it."

"Thanks for the advice," I said, even though I knew I was doing exactly that for a very long time. For there's only one person who had my heart, and she was all I would ever need.

"What happened to you, Nico?" I wondered. "You seem different from the time I met you at the Casino. You're much more…reserved."

And colder.

Nico narrowed his dark eyes. "A lot has happened around here - the Battle of the Labyrinth?" He scoffed. "They called it a victory. Nothing can be further from the truth. You're lucky you missed it."

I grew concerned. "Something bad happen to you?"

He shook his head. "No, not me." I waited until he had the courage to continue. "It's my sister Bianca. She's been in a coma since the battle."

"Oh my gods," I said, "I had no idea. I don't even know how you are going through this-!"

"Of course you don't!" he snapped. I flinched from his sudden burst of anger. The aura coming from
Nico spiked so high I felt like I was being weighed down. "You don't depend on anybody! Bianca is all I have! I can't lose her like this! She may never wake up again!"

"Nico," I said sternly, struggling to breathe properly. "You got to calm down, okay? Bianca will wake up again. You just have to…you have to have faith."

"Faith," he repeated, incredulous. I nodded, thankful his aura was going down. Just a bit.

"Yes," I said, "I know it sounds cheesy…"

"It is cheesy."

I rolled my eyes. "Hear me out: Sometimes having faith is all we could do, and I was once told that it helps to have hope in something. It's what motivates us to keep going. I know what it's like to lose someone close, but Bianca is still here. If you don't believe your sister will wake up, Nico, no one else will."

"Oh," he mumbled, calming down. He sat down on a nearby boulder. "I…I do believe she will wake up. She has to."

"That's good," I said carefully, walking to him until I was standing a foot away from him. "And if you like, I'll believe in her with you." Nico's eyes widen in surprise.

"Y-you will?"

I gave a brief smile, taking that moment to sit down next to him. I made sure to leave some space between us. "Of course, Nico, and I'm sure if others knew-Percy, Annabeth, Thalia- so many others will do the same."

"Why are you being so nice?" he muttered. "You don't know me."

"I know you care about your sister," I said. "That's enough for me. I...I kind of wish I was like you." Nico was stunned. "You, want to be like me? Why?" He sounded incredulous, making me wonder what it was I said that was so unbelievable.

I smiled uneasily, hoping it didn't look like a grimace. I didn't smile this often. "You're not alone. Even if she's not awake, you had Bianca beside you ever since you were born. I wish I had someone like that."

"Oh."

It was a long while before either of us spoke up, until Nico asked a sensitive question.

"You said…you lost someone before," Nico whispered, staring at me. "Who did you lose?"

I closed my eyes briefly, taking a moment to exhale. "A lot. I lost a lot of people close to me." Before Nico could say anything, I quickly changed the topic. My tone became light. "Anyway, I owe you one for saving me from that girl's clutches. The Apollo Cabin invited me to hang out with them, and others are coming too. Would you like to join? There's a lot of good food and drinks!"

Nico looked hesitant. "Parties aren't my kind of thing. I prefer being alone."

"Oh come on, Nico," I insisted. "It's free food and drinks! You can't say no to that. They have a whip cream cake!"
I don't like whip cream.

"I'll pretend I did not just hear that," I said. "Just give it a try? If you still feel uncomfortable, then you can leave anytime after you get some food. Okay?"

I didn't know why I was trying so hard to get Nico to join me. Most times, if a person said no, I just leave them be. Maybe, there was something about Nico that reminded me of my old self, the time when I didn't want to make any new friends. I regretted that back then, and I didn't want Nico making the same mistakes I did.

Finally, Nico sighed and stood up. "Alright, fine! But I get to leave whenever I feel like it!"

"It's a deal."

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"You're late," Will said as he opened the door to Cabin 7. The solid gold room was filled with tables of food, drinks, and musical devices. I noticed Austin at the corner managing the DJ station. Many demigods from other cabins were invited inside before me. He looked down to see Nico beside me. "Oh hey, Nico."

Nico gave a simple, "hey."

"He's here with me," I told him before I whispered, "do you mind?"

Will shook his head. "Come on in."

The two of us stepped inside, with Nico looking around the Cabin with a glimpse of wonder on his face. Each Cabin was built in a special way, and it was rare to be invited in one other than your parent cabin. The Apollo Cabin was much like Artemis'. There were a lot of musical instruments and archery equipment, the ceiling had an oculus that allowed sunlight to breach through, and the gold only emphasized the light. It was almost never dark in here whenever I came to visit.

"I guess…I'll go get food," Nico muttered, excusing himself from my and Will's company. I gave a brief smile of encouragement as he went away. When he left, Will gave a troubled expression.

"You better be careful around him," he warned. "He's dangerous."

"Is he?"

"His sister too," Will said grimly, "I'll never forget how Bianca managed to take out all those monsters on her own, and Nico…he took out so many monsters by himself before she and I even reached him! If that doesn't scream danger I don't know what does."

"Will," I reprimanded softly, "give the kid a break. Nico's not dangerous okay? His sister is in a coma, and he's trying to cope on his own. He's got a lot on his plate without you sprouting rumors behind his back."

"It's true though!" he protested. "I told Chiron about them, and he agrees with me. Oh, and one other thing…" He leaned closer to me, speaking in a whisper, like he's afraid someone would overhear. "Chiron and I think that Bianca and Nico could be Big Three children."

I widened my eyes slightly to indicate my surprise, but deep down, I wasn't really. Nico's large spike in his aura earlier confirmed Will's hypothesis. Will had told me of his encounter with the Di Angelo children at the funeral home. After hearing how the dead came out and did the impossible, I deduced
that Bianca (and Nico by relation) were connected to the Underworld. I was in disbelief the first time I heard it, thinking that another attempt at World War III was about to break out again with Hades breaking the oath this time. Then, I recalled my first encounter with Nico in the Lotus Casino, and realized that situation might not be the case.

"That's troublesome," I commented slowly. I narrowed my eyes. "Why are you telling me this private information? Surely, Chiron must have told you to keep quiet."

"He did," Will admitted, sheepish, "but I know I can trust you not to tell anyone else. You're not the type to spread rumors."

"Am I the only one you told?" He nodded. "Good. Let's keep it that way. We don't want this info to reach the wrong ears."

"I know." Will said quietly. "Look, just be careful okay? I've seen Nico fight, and he's really good. Give him a year or two, he be as powerful as Percy and Thalia. The same goes for Bianca. It's scary how strong these Big Three kids can be. They can master fighting and swordsmanship so much faster than the rest of us. One can only guess how far they can go. Don't you think so, Seth?"

"They're strong," I agreed, "but the way you're talking about them makes you sound intimidated."

"Who wouldn't be?"

I thought about that for a moment. Will and I went over to the table to get some drinks. I picked up a Canada Dry. "What do you think about Percy, Will?"

"Percy?" Will repeated, "I think he's a pretty chill guy. A bit slow sometimes, but cool."

"Are you scared of him?"

Will hesitated, before he confessed, "maybe at first."

"What changed?" I asked, opening the can. I took a sip. "Is it because you got to know him better? Saw him as a person instead of his over-glorified heritage?"

"Seth, I know what you're trying to get at," Will said, a bit impatient, "but Nico is different from Percy-!"

"What about Thalia?" I interrupted. "Were you scared of her too? Did you find her intimidating?"

"At first," he repeated, "I don't think that now."

"Then what about me?" I said quietly, not looking at him. "Or perhaps you thought I was freakish rather than scary."

"No!" he exclaimed, offended. "I never saw you like that ever. Seth, you got to believe me!"

"I do," I said softly, smiling briefly. "Thanks for that. What I'm trying to say is that you should give Nico a chance. He's just a kid after all. I don't want him to end up all alone."

Like the previous me, I thought morbidly.

"You gave me a chance, without anyone asking you to, and I'm grateful to have you as my best friend ever since."

He grinned. "Of course I would. You were the new camper coming in with awesome archery skills."
I just knew we were related somehow."

"You thought I was your half-brother," I recalled.

"Everyone did," Will said back, "to think you were actually my cousin...I saw that one coming ever since my father stayed silent about you for a month."

"It was that obvious huh?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Only the ones who were too dense didn't realize it."

I grew curious. "When you figured it out, how come you never saw me differently? You knew I was related to Artemis, and when I told you later about my birth, you didn't seem offended that I kept the truth from you for so long. Why?"

"Everyone has secrets, Seth," Will said seriously. There was this look in his blue eyes that I couldn't quite place. "Some more than others. It isn't my right to pry."

"I see," I murmured as the two of us moved to the back of the Apollo Cabin. More demigods were coming in, and we were blocking the drinks.

"Anyway, what did that girl want?" Will asked, a Pepsi in hand. He took a sip from his can.

"It was a confession."

Will choked on his drink. I had to pat his back repetitively, and held him steady as he spat out the soda. He rubbed his mouth hastily with his free hand.

"You're joking!"

"I don't joke," I deadpanned. "Not when it comes to this."

"Seth, that girl is hot." Will grinned. "So what did you say?"

"I rejected her."

"No way!"

"I'm not interested in having a relationship," I said sternly. "I have no time for them. There are far more important things to do than date."

Will rolled his eyes. "You keep telling yourself that, you will die as a lonely, old man. You got to make time somehow. Don't you want to have a wife and kid someday?"

"I can always adopt."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Adopt? You want kids, but not the wife. Seth, am I missing something here?"

I only stared at him blankly. "You're not missing anything, Will. I told you before that I have no interest in relationships. That void of interest extends permanently."

"You mean you don't want to date ever?"

"Yes."
"Dude," he started. "How long ago was this?"

"Last winter, I believe."

"I should have saw this coming," Will muttered to himself. "Do you care to explain?"

"Sorry," I said. "But that's another secret I plan on keeping to myself."

"Fine," Will answered, and the matter was dropped instantly. This was one of the reasons why I found Will so easy and fun to talk to.

The party was fun while it lasted. I ended up having half of the whip cream cake to myself, and I was having a blast with Will, Austin, Reeve, and Kayla. Percy, Annabeth, and Grover also came by briefly, though they remained outside. After the party ended, Grover introduced me to his girlfriend Juniper.

"So you're the lucky girl," I said warmly. Juniper blushed while grasping Grover's arm. I held out a hand and she shook it gently. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"T-the pleasure is mine," Juniper said. "I never thought I'd meet a child of Artemis. Grover's told me a lot about you."

"He told me a lot about you too," I replied, letting go of her hand. "It looks like he is right: you do seem like a very sweet girl." Juniper blushed harder at my words.

"Quit flattering her so much," Grover joked. "Her face is now as red as a tomato!"

"A tomato?!" Juniper shrieked. "Not that vile plant!"

"I-it's just an expression, Juniper," Grover said quickly. "You don't look like a tomato! If you were, I'm sure you make a very cute tomato plant, n-not that I'm saying you are one…"

I felt my lips turn up at their conversation. Was this what adoration was like between couples? Juniper later excused herself, telling us that she needed time to make herself appear less like a 'tomato' with Grover apologizing profusely.

I noticed Annabeth eyeing me strangely. "What?"

She shook her head. "There's something different about you."

"What's different?"

"I'm not sure," Annabeth said,shrugging it off. "Forget it. I'm guessing it's because of Lee right?"

I swallowed heavily at the reminder. "Yeah, I just attended his funeral before I came here."

"I'm so sorry," Percy said, sympathetic. "You two were very close."

"I'm alright," I said reassuringly. "It's Will I'm worried about. He pretends that he's fine, but I can tell he isn't. I'm starting to think it's this place. Everything here triggers a memory."

"I understand," Annabeth said. She put a hand under her chin, in deep thought. "Maybe Will just needs a change in scene?"

I raised an eyebrow. "A change in scene? Like what?"
"I got it!" Percy exclaimed. "How about we get Will to enroll at my high school?" I stared at him in disbelief. "What? It's close by! He doesn't need to stay the whole term, and he can stay at my place for a while."

"High school?" I scoffed. "No offense, Percy, but the last thing Will needs is to have monsters disguised as teachers attack him."

"That only happened once," he pointed out. "It's not like he'll be alone. I'll be there to watch him, and Will can take care of himself, Seth. You don't need to baby him."

I protested, "I'm not! I'm just…looking out for him." Percy gave a snort.

"Guys," Grover interrupted, "it's a great idea and all, but shouldn't you talk this out with Will first? He might prefer camp over high school."

"I won't be surprised if he does," I muttered. "Schools are awful."

"How would you know?" Annabeth asked. Of course, she would be the one to defend mortal schooling. "You've never been to one."

"I hear enough atrocities from Percy to know." I stated blandly. "Beats me why you two would want to keep going to that danger zone and not stay here instead. What was it this time? Demon cheerleaders?"

Percy rolled his eyes. "At least give him the option. No matter which choice he makes, he's welcome to stay at my place after school if he wants."

I sighed. "Alright, I'll tell him. Thanks for offering, Percy."

"Sure."

"By the way," Annabeth said, "have you heard the rumors lately?"

"Which ones?" The rest of us said simultaneously before we looked at each other and grinned stupidly.

"It's the one about the spy…"

I choked in response. What was Annabeth talking about?! I haven't even spoken with Chiron yet.

"It's just a theory," Annabeth explained in a whisper. Thankfully, she didn't notice my unease. "I want to hear your thoughts about it. Basically, it's very possible that someone leaked out the camp's battle formations. How do you think Luke got the army placed in strategic positions where there were the most demigods possible? Also, a majority of the traps set by the Hermes and Hephaestus cabins weren't set off!"

"They could have been lucky," Percy argued. "Luke was a camper. Maybe he had seen these plans before."

"The plans are changed every year," she pointed out.

"They were really lucky."

"No one is that lucky," I said sternly. "I don't believe this is a coincidence. Annabeth, do you believe this is true? Could there be a spy working for Luke…right here in this camp?"
Annabeth hesitated. "Judging from the evidence, I have to say I believe it."

This just made my future job so much harder. I kept on a straight face, trying hard to calm down my rapid heartbeat.

"Who could it be?" Grover asked quietly. "If this is true, then the spy could be someone we know."

"Maybe Michael is the one," I joked. I didn't notice Annabeth and Percy sharing a look. "He's missing isn't he? He must have compromised himself and fled."

"It's not Michael," Percy muttered.

I looked at him questionably, "you sound very sure."

Annabeth quickly cut in. "The spy has to be here still. That's where they are the most useful. The camp is where the information is at. If Michael is the spy, he would have stayed instead of going wherever he's going."

"Okay," I muttered, "it's only a joke."

"Let's not talk about this anymore," Percy said. "We can't start doubting everybody. We'll just have to hope this spy makes a mistake and reveal who they are."

"Now that, will take a lot of luck." I murmured, and then I said, "I gotta go. I'm assisting Chiron with his junior archery class. I'll see you guys later."

Percy, Annabeth, and Grover said their farewells to me before I headed to my cabin to grab my stuff. I noticed Lappy was already inside.

"There you are," I said to the beagle. "I was wondering where you went." Lappy leaped off my bed and came to join me at the door, not saying anything. "Oh, so you're still giving me the silent treatment? Suit yourself."

I took a moment to calm my thoughts as I packed up my quiver and bow. There's a spy in the camp. What awful timing. It's like the Fates were sending me a message through Annabeth to hurry my ass up. I went over to my clean table to grab some things, taking a quick glance at a silver framed photo. The picture was of me, Will, and Lee, with Will circling his arms around Lee's and my neck in the middle. Chiron was in the background, looking amused. I recalled Kayla being the one to take the picture. I held the picture to my face, allowing myself to genuinely smile, if only briefly.

If only it is always like this, I thought morbidly. Why do things have to change? Why do they change for the worse?

I felt the beagle nudging my calves, reminding me of my duty. I sighed as I set the picture down again before Lappy and I exited the empty cabin.

The junior archery class went by smoothly. Before I left for Walt's, Chiron had asked me if I would like to be his teaching assistant for the younger demigods. I had agreed easily, since I didn't have much else to do at the time, and since then, I was the archery instructor for young demigods and Ares kids. After the lesson ended, I spoke with Chiron about meeting him in his office later today as well as informing him of my knowledge regarding the Di Angelos.

"Don't worry, Chiron," I told him quietly. "I won't say anything about them. Will only wanted to
warn me about Nico. He didn't tell anyone else."

"I'm glad you understand the sensitivity much more than your cousin," Chiron said.

"So I'll see you in your office after dinner?"

"I'll be available," Chiron informed me. "Great job today, Seth. I see your training with Forger has produced results. Is Walt Forger well?"

"He's fine," I told him. "A bit too grumpy and OCD, but overall, he's a good trainer."

Chiron gave a laugh, "Exactly as I remembered him. He was only a little older than you when I first met him at Camp Half-Blood."

I was surprised, "Walt came here? But I thought he couldn't…"

"No one knew of his Roman ancestry," Chiron said quietly, making sure no one was listening. "The gods made sure of that: he only stayed here for a day before he left for Massachusetts. He's never been here since, and with good reason. The young man wanted to leave as soon as possible. He couldn't stand being surrounded by enemies."

"What do you mean?"

"The Greeks and Romans have been enemies for a long time, Seth," Chiron explained. "For demigods, this rivalry extends even further. If a Greek and Roman demigod were to meet, they have developed this sense of animosity towards each other. Walt must have found this place unbearable."

"I never realized," I muttered. "I don't feel any animosity towards Walt."

"It takes time," Chiron explained. "Since you've been in his company for awhile, your senses must have dimmed and grown used to his presence, making him no longer an enemy."

*That makes sense,* I thought. *But when I first met him, I didn't have those feelings at all. Maybe it's because I'm Roman and Greek?*

After a couple minutes of conversation, I quickly excused myself and left for my cabin once more. Clarisse's bow must have dried by now, and I should give it to her ASAP. Children of Ares weren't known for their patience.

Since the archery class ended slightly earlier, there was no one around the cabins. Most of them were still in class, at the bathhouses, or at the pavilion eating with friends. There was only a young girl tending the fire. I didn't pay her much attention at first, but as I went past her to go to my Cabin, I felt a godly aura hit me hard.

I felt my knees bend slightly in shock. At first, I thought an Olympian had just arrived, but no one else appeared. There was only me and the brown-haired girl tending the fire. So wouldn't that mean…? I narrowed my eyes suspiciously as I continued to my Cabin, opening the door to allow Lappy inside before shutting the door after him. I heard Lappy's protests, but I didn't let him out. I felt the need to talk to this deity, whoever she was, alone.

I found the girl again, who was still fiddling with the flames with a stick. The girl looked up as I approached cautiously.

"Excuse me," I said. "Pardon me if I'm wrong, but are you a goddess?"
The girl smiled, "Seth Hunter. I was wondering when you would notice. Come join me."

She held out an arm, and gestured at the seat next to her. I sat down.

"I apologize if this seems rude," I started, "but which goddess are you? Judging from your aura, I believe you are an Olympian, yet I don't think I saw you during the last Winter Solstice."

"You're right," she said, smiling still. I studied her face a bit and noticed that there were small gleams of fire in her eyes. "I am Hestia, goddess of the hearth."

"Lady Hestia," I said respectfully, "I'm honored to make your acquaintance. Have you always been tending the fire here? If so, I'm so sorry I didn't notice you until now."

"Enough with the apologies, Seth Hunter," Hestia said, "Very few demigods tend to notice me. They have too much going on. You are only the second person of this generation to do so."

"Isn't that lonely?" I pondered. "Not being noticed?"

"There are benefits to solitude," she said wistfully. "It's calming. You tend to take in things that not everyone will discern. Wouldn't you agree?"

I appeared thoughtful, "I suppose I agree with you somewhat."

"Somewhat?" Hestia questioned.

"Well, I used to prefer being alone," I admitted. "I had trust issues. I still do, but ever since I came here, I made so many new friends. Some of these friends are even family to me. I have come to enjoy their company more than anything."

I didn't know why I was saying these things out loud. They weren't normally topics I liked to talk about. There was something about Hestia that calmed my heart and thoughts. I've never felt more at peace.

"I see," Hestia said, "then why do you look so lost?"

"Lost?" I said, startled.

"You feel as though you lack a home," she said carefully. "I also detect sadness. You haven't forgiven yourself about St. Clair's, and you are burdened with so many other things. That is why you do not smile, and why you still feel left out, even amongst the company of others."

I felt my body freeze up. I couldn't deny Hestia's words, so I remained silent. My head was lowered, shamed. I suddenly felt very exposed; Like all my life's secrets were being laid out for the goddess to see. I tried suppressing my thoughts, hoping the goddess wouldn't read them. I didn't see Hestia's pitiful gaze.

I felt her hand touch my shoulder gently. I looked up at her and asked hesitantly. "What do you suppose I do? H-how can I live more freely?"

The goddess smiled, "Allow others to come into your life, Seth Hunter. That is my solution. I know how much you yearn for a family and home, for acceptance of what you are. But you can only hope to obtain what you desire when you are actively seeking for them."

"It's not that easy," I replied slowly, "you know what I am, Lady Hestia. You know what I've done in the past, and what I may do in the future. They...they won't understand."
She said tenderly, "Relationships aren't simple. It takes many stages for a person to comprehend another, and then another set of stages for them to develop trust, and even more to develop love."

"I do not love," I replied stiffly, "I can't."

"No Seth, you do," Hestia said softly. "I know you love that young mortal girl. You love and care about her. If no one else, she is the one you put above yourself."

"Fine, so I do care about her," I said tightly, "but that's all."

"You fear rejection."

"Fear?" I said, slightly incredulous. "I'm not scared of this. I've faced pain and death's door more times than I can count! That is something to fear. I do not fear rejection, Lady Hestia. I've grown so used to rejection my whole life that I am now immune to the feeling."

"Child," Hestia said; her eyes sad. "From the way I see it, you are already taking steps in avoiding rejection. That is a sign of fear, Seth."

I refused to grace that statement with an answer.

"Are you familiar with the lunar calendar?" she suddenly asked. I blinked at the change in topic, but nodded. "The moon has many different phases doesn't it?"

"I guess."

"Often times, the moon fades away amongst the clouds," she began. "Other times, it gleams dimly, while on a few special days, it shines so bright that it is the very first thing you see in the dark sky."

I was puzzled. "What are you trying to say?"

"Relationships are the same, Seth," Hestia said. "They can be broken, but they can also be mended. It takes time, yes, but more than anything, it takes a lot of willingness and patience. For once you invest your all into fixing that broken bond, you will discover a bond stronger than how it was before being damaged in the first place. It's rare, but it can happen."

I gave a light scoff. "That's wishful thinking."

"It doesn't hurt to be wishful," Hestia pointed out, "especially in troubled times like these."

"No," I said after a moment, "I suppose it doesn't."

-o-
Enrollment

When I left Hestia, I was disturbed.

I returned to my Cabin without a word. Lappy immediately approached me, probably angry for being forcefully shut in earlier, but I could care less right now. I closed the door to my Cabin gently, and a quick glance to the blinded window confirmed Hestia's sudden disappearance, with a small fire left in her absence.

*Allow others into your life, Seth Hunter.* Hestia's words echoed in my mind. *That is my solution.*

I gave a mirthless laugh. I didn't dare say or even think this in the goddess' presence, but that advice was so mediocre. Couldn't Hestia think of a better answer to tell me? Even some encouragement would be good. What did Hestia think of me? My life's troubles weren't something a fairy tale ending could fix. Did she see my life as some cliché drama?

*She probably does,* that voice said. *She's a goddess. She's seen it all before.*

Maybe, I thought. Hestia did try to understand me though (even if it meant looking into my mind), which was more than what I could hope for most people. She was also very considerate and well, humble. I'd give her points for that. It was nice to speak about my problems out loud without an overly critical audience, but other than that, I didn't learn or come to expect anything from our conversation, which left me disappointed.

Without further adieu, the rest of the day went by as quick as usual. I finally gave Clarisse her new red bow. I could tell she was very impressed with the craftsmanship. She gave the bow a couple of tries, and seeing how her shots worked the way she wanted it to, our deal was complete.

At dinner, since the Artemis and Apollo tables were right next to each other, Will and I were able to converse privately without anyone intruding. Lappy was currently eating bacon burgers beside me. I informed him of Annabeth's idea and Percy's offer of getting into his high school.

"*High school?*" Will repeated, incredulous. "Do you have any idea how long it's been since I even went to a school?"

"It's an option," I said softly. "You don't have to take it, but…"

"You want me to," he guessed. I didn't reply. "*I'm fine,* Seth. I don't need to be anywhere else but here."

I rolled my eyes. "You could've fooled me. I heard from your siblings and friends that you are visiting Lee's memorial way too often. That's not fine."

Lee's memorial, along with Castor's and the recently departed, was located at the edge of the woods, near the glistening lake. Each memorial was a slab of smooth marble with the name and cabin carved upon it. It was a camp tradition to do so, and they were put up for a year at the most, otherwise Camp Half-Blood would be running out of space. It's basically a short-term cemetery. The idea was brought up a while back in order to allow year-round campers (especially the younger ones) to pay respects to the deceased without fear of being attacked like in the outside world. I accompanied Will once on these visits yesterday after dinner, and we encountered Pollux there too.

Will clenched his jaw tightly. "I...I have responsibilities here, Seth. I'm the counselor. I have Austin, Kayla, Reeve, and the others that I have to look after."
"You can always leave Austin in charge," I pointed out. "Look at the Gardners: Katie goes to school during the year, and her sister Miranda takes over."

He muttered uncertainly. "I-I can't just ditch them."

"Will," I said firmly. "Do you want to go to school or stay here? I'm asking what you want to do. Austin and your siblings can take care of themselves. Don't use them as an excuse."

Will hesitated. "You really think this is a good idea?"

"I'm asking you that," I reminded. "I'm not the one making the decision."

"Percy really said it was okay?"

"Positive."

The son of Apollo let out a detached sigh. He put his hands to his forehead, looking stressed. "I'm really not at my best lately, huh? Is this why I worry you so much?"

"I always worry about you," I told him, now certain that Percy's suggestion was the right one after all. "You need some time away from here. Lee wouldn't have wanted you to be like this because of him. It's only temporary. Percy said you don't need to stay the whole term if you don't want to. The outside world is a good place for you to sharpen your skills and busy yourself with…I don't know, science and history and all that crap."

Will gave a small laugh, which I took as a good sign. "My grades are going to be awful."

"A for effort," I smirked. "That's what counts. Are you up for it?"

"Alright," he said after a moment. "I'll trust you on this one. I'll give it a shot."

"I'll let Percy know."

-0-

True to my predictions, Percy was more than willing to allow Will to stay over at his home for the next couple months. After dinner, Annabeth, Grover, and I caught up some more before I excused myself to my cabin. I had managed to obtain some alone time after getting Annabeth to take Lappy from me. Annabeth had been more than happy to do so, much to Lappy's displeasure.

At my cabin, I sat down at my desk and tried my best to write a good letter. I made sure to check for spelling and grammar mistakes, and after a half hour of editing and revising, I finally wrote a decent letter explaining my leave.

My deepest apologies if my departure has come as a surprise. Ever since I received my prophecy, I've found myself unable to stay for long. Do not look for me, I'm alright. Understand that my actions are necessary and it will all be explained in the end. Stay safe and look out for each other okay? Annabeth, Percy, Will, Grover, Katie…take care.

See you all soon,

Seth

That should be good, I thought. I even left a message for Annabeth. I was sure she would figure it out. The letter was brief and concise. I decided to mention my prophecy to them just so I had a more solid excuse for leaving. I didn't know when I would see them last. The next time we met, we could
be on different sides. I could only hope they would give me the benefit of the doubt, and maybe this letter would serve as a warning about me.

I folded the paper gently, putting the letter on top of the stack of VIP papers that Athena wanted me to give Chiron. I also had a clean sheet of paper summarizing its contents. I planned on handing this sheet to Chiron first. After going through them carefully one last time, I put them all in a makeshift folder and carried it with me underhand. The sky was darkening by the time I departed, and I made sure not to bump into anyone familiar before I slipped inside Chiron's office.

His office was empty. I sat at the furthest corner of the room as I waited. During my wait, I decided to practice that trick Nemesis gave me. For fun, I closed my eyes and imagined holding a cool pair of shades I saw at a store, and sure enough, I felt something light drop into my outstretched hand. I tried the glasses on, my vision not hindered a bit. Before I could take them off, I heard Chiron enter.

I waited for the centaur to settle behind his desk before I spoke. "Chiron."

I noticed Chiron flinch in surprise, before calming down again. "Seth Hunter. Forgive me for not being aware of your presence here."

I raised an eyebrow at his remark. Did he expect me to come later? Oops.

Chiron gave a weary smile. "I can see your stealth ability has improved to the point that it would rival a child of Hades."

I gave an amused chuckle at his little jab at our shared secret. "You flatter me, Chiron. I'm sorry for catching you off guard, but I have…" I took out the summarized list from the folder. "…some critical information for you to see."

I stepped forward and placed the folded list in front of him. Chiron picked up the paper slowly, scanning its contents quickly. I noticed how his eyes widened in surprise when he realized what the contents meant.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"When I left camp after the Quest, my new mentor and I have been digging around on the enemy's whereabouts. As you realized, most of that information is what resulted in our 'digging around'."

Along with some divine meddling, I might add.

"I see," Chiron stated. "I can only imagine the lengths you and your mentor have gone to collect this." He folded the paper again. "Thank you for telling me this. I'll make sure the gods are aware of it."

If they aren't already, I thought. Athena may have informed them.

But all I said was "of course, anything to hinder Kronos' forces is welcome to me. I also have something else." I gave my written letter to him. "I want you to give this to Annabeth. Make sure Percy, Grover, Will, and Katie read it as well. It's a letter explaining my departure."

"You are leaving again this year? You just arrived not too long ago." He sounded displeased.

I nodded. "Yeah, I know. But right now…this place holds too many sad memories."

I may have been able to put up a stronger front, but I was still just as affected by Lee's death as Will was. I needed a change in scene too. Now that Chiron had most of the information Athena wanted
him to have, it was now my turn.

"One other thing," I started. Chiron looked up. "I also came to tell you something pertaining to
myself."

"What will that be?"

How was I supposed to tell him? If my encounter with Artemis was anything to go by, Chiron was
likely to protest against my actions. If I told him my plans outright, he would reject them. I decided to
lead into it slowly.

"I-have you heard the rumors lately Chiron?" I asked, repeating what Annabeth had said earlier.
Chiron, predictably, looked confused.

"Depends on which ones, Seth," he answered.

"From what I heard from Annabeth since I got back around two days ago, there was a rumor of a
spy within Camp Half-Blood," I flickered my eyes to study his gaze intently. The centaur appeared
troubled by the claim. "Do you think this rumor could be true?"

"It's…a possibility," he said reluctantly. "It is a tactic the Titan Army would certainly use to their
advantage."

I gave a mental sigh, closing my eyes briefly to absorb the horrible news. Even Chiron believed a
spy could be present, which made this 'rumor' even more dangerous for me and the spy. "I thought as
much."

"How does this rumor relate to you Seth?" he questioned.

I didn't say anything for a moment. First, I made sure that there was no one else other than Chiron
and me- outside or inside- to hear what I had to say. My sharp hearing didn't pick up any other
breathing rates, so it was safe.

"We…are at a lost, Chiron," I reasoned. If I named my reasons, Chiron may be more inclined to
agree. "Even with the gods' help, their numbers and list of allies outweighs our own. I do not know
how skilled those traitors are, but from what I've seen, their fighting abilities rival our senior campers,
and you know that half of the camp are made up of children yet to be in their teens. Plus…Kronos is
quite skilled in launching surprise attacks, and the possibility of a spy in our camp- they may already
know how to exploit our weaknesses."

I took a moment to take off the shades still perched on my face. I wanted Chiron to see how
determined I was to fulfill my future role.

"I-I think I can turn the tides back in our favor." I finally uttered.

For a brief moment, Chiron was confused, and almost a split second later, his face was filled with
shock and recognition of my plan.

"That is too dangerous!" he protested loudly, startling me slightly. "I will not risk your wellbeing just
so you can even out the odds!"

"Do you think I would suggest this unless there is no other way? I've checked to make sure if there
are any other alternatives, but this is the best possible way for us to ensure a chance at winning.
Kronos' forces are growing bigger and stronger as we speak!"
Chiron stubbornly refused to back down. "We have the Di Angelo siblings. Kronos is still unaware of their parentage. We still have at least one advantage over them! There is no need for you to do this!"

I narrowed my eyes at his point. So you would rather I sat back and let two powerful but awfully inexperienced children carry that immense load of responsibility over their shoulders?

"True, but they are still young, Chiron. It's not like…I doubt their abilities, but I don't like the idea of burdening the consequences upon them should Percy happen to fail, which I certainly hope won't ever happen."

How typical of Chiron to depend on the Big Three children. I really pity them. Chiron puts too much pressure. There's no way I was going to burden them even more. When it came to my safety and my future, I would take care of them myself. Bianca was hospitalized, and in no shape of taking on what Chiron was forcing her to do. Nico was more resilient, but my conversation with him earlier told me he was rash and quick to anger. Perhaps it's because of his age, or it's a flaw in his personality, but I wouldn't depend on him either. Those two were the last I expected to serve as a fail-safe. Maybe they would improve in the future, who knows? But the war wasn't going to wait for people to change for the better.

"You are also young, Seth." Chiron said, unaware of my sudden epiphany, I didn't know if I could ever look at him the same way again. "No matter how much training you have done under Walt's instructions, you are still a child."

Oh, he did not just go there.

"I haven't been a 'child' since I was thirteen, Chiron," I said stiffly, struggling to keep my temper in. Did he see Percy as a 'child' when he took on his first Quest? What about Thalia huh? She got turned into a tree at how many years? What about—

I forced myself to stop. I had to stop thinking these dangerous thoughts. This was what Kronos would want. I couldn't start doubting myself, or Chiron's leadership. Chiron had no control over who got sent on Quests. That fault lied with the gods. Chiron's always supported me, and he saved my life without any kind of personal gain. It would be so easy for me to turn to the Titans genuinely if I focused on the wrong areas. That was my curse.

"I…I don't blame you at all for that," I said aloud to myself, "but we need a better reassurance, a way to outwit the enemy and be able to predict their movements before they do them."

"There is no need for you to go that far!" Chiron protested. "What you and your mentor have been doing is more than enough!"

"It is not enough!" I argued. "Scavenging around and collecting data is never enough, and you know that Chiron! If you will only allow me to do this, imagine the possibilities! We'll be able to strike them in their weakest point without them even realizing it!"

"I will not have one of my best students venture into that dark pit alone!"

"Well, it's either that or more people are going to die," I said angrily. "I know that you know that this isn't the last we've seen of them. This is only the beginning: now that Kronos has taken over Castellan's body he's even more of a danger than ever! I am not going to sit here and do nothing until their next attack!"

"Can you not stay and help us Seth?" the centaur said, changing tactics. I heard the pleading in his
voice, causing my ire to go down. "Your guidance and strength will be of great use for us if you stay instead. You are already one of my archery instructors."

"I have considered that option," I stated, "but I'm sure Will can be just as great an instructor as me, and though I hate to admit it, Michael Yew as well."

*If he ever turns up,* I thought morbidly.

"You can also serve as one of our war leaders," Chiron said, annoying me with his excuses. "As the Cabin 8 counselor, you have that right."

"Chiron…” I breathed, impatience etched on every word. "I am not needed here at camp. The other cabin counselors got that job covered. My skills lie elsewhere. If I am to help make an impact in the coming war, I can't always just hide behind a safe barrier when the chaos is somewhere else."

"How will I even get in contact with you, Seth? You know already that Iris Messaging is now out of the question!"

I snapped my fingers, my mind visualizing the walkie-talkie that I purposely left at my cabin. The device fell onto his desk successfully. Nemesis' gift to me was proving to be useful. "We will communicate using these." I handed the communication device to him, Chiron took it, reluctant. "I also have one just like it. These are communicators that Walt hard-wired himself. It can receive service quite easily as long as there is a signal around. Very useful since it doesn't rely on any particular company, companies run by monsters that is."

"If I am ever in a risky situation or I hear of any plans of attack, I will inform you through this." I continued. "I know how high the stakes are. I know that it is even likely…that this may be the last time you and I get to talk like this."

Chiron still appeared hesitant, but I could tell he was starting to question himself. I pushed further. "Don't you see, Chiron? I'm the perfect candidate for this task. I don't know how much you already know about my past…but I am destined for this role. I can see it now. Please, I want at least one person from camp to know about this."

"What…does your mother think about this?" he asked finally, his tone resigned. That was when I knew I finally convinced him.

"She knows," I answered simply. He didn't need to know how much persuading I had to do to get Artemis to agree. "I informed her through Lord Hermes. So far you, Lady Artemis and her hunters, Lord Apollo, Lord Hermes, and Walt…” I made sure to keep Lynetta's name out of it. "…are the only ones who know about this. As for the others, they can't ever know. We still don't know who the spy is. It will be too dangerous if too many people know about it."

"Did Lady Artemis agree to it?" he asked slowly.

"She requests your consent."

The centaur lowered his gaze, his hand to his chin in deep thought. His prolonged silence made me nervous. What if he refused to accept my actions? What then? I needed at least one person from camp to know about my real intentions, and Artemis said that person must be Chiron. I couldn't afford his refusal.

I decided to play the sympathy card.

"Please Chiron," I began softly, mirroring the look that I saw Will use whenever he visited Lee's
Memorial. My voice was even; my eyes drooped slightly to express sadness, but never looking away from him. I held my hands together in front of me, squeezing them tightly as an act of nervousness. I’d become a better actor these last few months. "I…I don't want anyone else to ever feel the way I did when I lost my family." Chiron faltered, and I knew then my facade was working. "I don't want anyone to die like…like Lee did. Please."

He sighed. "Are you sure about this Seth? What you are suggesting…is far more dangerous than even a Quest. Are you up for the challenge?"

I risked a smile, happy that I finally got Chiron to agree, but also saddened by what his agreement would mean for my future. I hate that damn prophecy so much.

"Of course, Chiron," I said, nodding. "I will do my best to join Kronos."

"How soon are you going to join them?" he questioned.

"Before this year ends definitely," I said. "But not immediately. I plan on finishing Walt's training first, and then proceed to join up with them."

"You are almost done with his training?" Chiron said in surprise.

I said carefully, "I was told that I am making good progress, and I will very likely finish before the winter holidays."

"You must be doing very well," he remarked. "His training isn't easy to complete."

"Yes," I agreed. I placed my folder containing the specifics onto his desk. "Make sure you look through these carefully. Assign whatever places you think best for the others to rummage through. I'm sure you'll find a couple willing to take on the challenge."

"I appreciate what you are doing Seth," Chiron said quietly. "Is there anything else you require?"

I shook my head. "Not at the moment." I got up from my seat slowly and walked to the door. "Just make sure you put that info to good use."

I opened the door with a click, and before I stepped outside, Chiron interrupted.

"I'm proud of you, Seth," he told me, causing me to hitch a breath. "You will always be one of my best students. I want you to know that."

I felt my cheeks burn. I lifted a hand to my face, and looked away from the centaur sheepishly.

"Thank you, Chiron. That means a lot to me."

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I stayed for another day before I started to pack up and leave, and I wasn't the only one preparing. It was now the end of August, and for summer-only campers, it meant that the new school year was approaching. Percy and Annabeth had started to pack up, and Will was also hitching a ride with Percy and Mrs. Jackson. I could tell Will was nervous, and I made sure to be available any time he needed help. It's been a while since Will went out into the mortal world. I told him he had the option to back out if he really wasn't ready, but Will refused to go back on his word. He had already left Austin in charge, and he was looking forward to his freshman year at Goode High School.

I didn't leave on the same day as the summer campers. I left three days earlier. I made a quick call to Walt and Lynetta, and Lynetta soon called back saying she was waiting for me outside. I didn't offer
any good-byes, which I was sure was going to anger Will and the others badly, but at least I offered a letter this time. Saying good-bye to them when I knew the next time won't be so favorable would leave a nauseating feel to my chest that I didn't want to experience. I hated good-byes.

I spent a couple days to train. For three days, I focused on expanding my control over celestial silver, and I came up with a couple new tricks. Other than lengthening the blade of a knife, it appeared I could morph the standard knives and arrows any way I liked—as long as I had the energy and imagination. I already succeeded in creating a larger, sturdier bow that could hold an increased capacity of arrows. Although it was only a short while, I managed to directly summon two swords instead of knives. I could currently materialize up to eight arrows at once.

After each exercise, my body would feel weary and I would ask Lynetta to grant me some rest. I would fall asleep right after for a couple hours at a time before all of my energy was replenished.

There was only one last place Athena wanted us to investigate, and after hearing what kind of place it was, I nearly cursed aloud—

It was a high school. A freaking high school.

No words could express the amount of irritation I felt towards the Fates.

"I jinxed it," I muttered angrily. Lynetta looked at me in confusion briefly, before continuing to explain the plans.

"Madison High School is a private school," she said. "Mr. Forger and I managed to secure a school uniform a few days ago. They are especially known for their music program too. I'm sure you have no trouble blending in at that criterion."

Lynetta and I were in my room. I was sitting on the bed, while Lynetta went through my closet and pulled out the Madison uniform: a dark blue blazer, dress shirt, blue and yellow striped tie, slacks, and dress shoes. What a ridiculously nerdy outfit. She set them on the bed beside me.

"You will use a different alias from last time," Lynetta said, "but you will still wear the glasses and the wig."

"Can I please not wear the wig?" I replied. "That thing scratches my scalp and I'm always worried if it'll fall off by accident. It hinders me when I'm fighting."

"It's safer to have a complete disguise."

"It's not like I'd know anyone there," I pointed out. "I'll still wear the glasses, and my hair color is pretty common. I won't stand out."

Lynetta pursed her lips tightly. "Fine. I suppose the wig can be discarded."

"Great."

"You will be playing the role of an honors student who just transferred from another school..." Lynetta continued. For the next hour, Lynetta prepped me up on my new identity while telling me what to watch out for and what info I may need to find and destroy. I had a week to familiarize myself with my surroundings and complete Athena's request.

The next day, Lynetta drove me to Madison High School, which resided in the state of Pennsylvania. Walt had provided cash for me to book a nearby hotel, and I had a schoolbag filled with books and supplies on my shoulders. I had my glasses on, and my normally unruly hair was now tamed and
parted on a different side. I looked like the world's biggest geek.

Lynetta left once she dropped me off in front of the fancy school. The institution had seen better days. There were cracks and ivy growing alongside its brick and marble walls, and the statue of James Madison was covered with rust. It definitely didn't look as welcoming as it did in the brochure.

I heard the school bell ring, and I recalled from the briefing that the bell was what signaled the start and end of each class. I was already late.

Thankfully, the main office was right by the entrance. I found one of the secretaries, introduced myself as a new transfer student and the lady quickly printed out my junior year class schedule, locker combination, and a map of the school after I offered some forged documentation. I even met with the principal of the school, a dark-skinned woman known as Ms. Berkshire. From what I could deduce from her aura, the principal was mortal, which was definitely good news.

"We don't get many transfer students," Ms. Berkshire said, smiling. I gave a fake smile in return. "Where did you say you were from, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Just call me William, ma'am," I said. Yes, my alias was William Fletcher. Sue me. "I'm from New York. My parents like to move around a lot."

"I hope you come to enjoy what Madison has to offer, William," Ms. Berkshire replied. I nodded absently. "It says here on your resume that you are a pianist?"

"Yes ma'am, it is a favorite hobby that I hope to expand here," I said carefully.

"That's wonderful! What other subjects interest you?"

I thought about it for a moment. I could answer this one honestly. "I've always liked literature and physics. I really like Shakespeare."

We talked some more, and I could tell I left a good impression on Ms. Berkshire, who seemed to be looking at me with high expectations and approval. I was a little hazy of what my resume contained, but Lynetta must have prettied it up very well. Regardless, gaining the principal's favor would be a great benefit for later.

Soon, the bell rang yet again and my first day at high school officially started.

It was a horrible start.

"Watch it!" I felt one of the students shove me roughly to the side as they walked past, causing me to collide against other students, who gave offended looks before scoffing at me condescendingly and muttering words like 'idiot' and other vulgar terms I'd leave to your imagination.

"Sorry!" I said quickly, keeping a good hand on my dark-rimmed glasses, before blending in with the traffic jam in the hallway. It was a miracle I even made it to my class in one piece. I had Biology second period.

All the good seats in the front were already taken, and some of the open seats, I soon realized, were reserved by cliques. I finally found an open seat in the back, next to this overweight kid who was drooling on a pillow. I wrinkled my nose in displeasure. My gods, the kid smelled like he didn't shower for a month. Didn't anyone teach this kid proper hygiene?

The teacher finally came in and took roll call, and unfortunately, since the students here all lived in tight communities and were stuck together since kindergarten, the teacher immediately noticed the
new addition on the list and made me introduce myself to the class. When I said that I was from New York, some of the students grew interested.

"Which part of New York are you from?" one of the guys asked. "I have a cousin who works in Manhattan."

"I'm from Brooklyn," I said.

"Do you go to Broadway a lot?" a girl chirped up. "Maybe Time Square? Or the Empire State Building?"

"Uh…"

"What about Central Park?"

"The Statue of Liberty?"

"I hear Queens is really nice, is that true?"

"Enough," Mr. O'Neil called out, sparing me. "You can ask Mr. Fletcher these questions after class. Now turn to your textbooks to page 237…"

When I heard that bell ring again, I quickly zoomed out of the classroom. I didn't want anyone to interrogate me about New York attractions I've heard of but never been to other than the Empire State building, and the only floor I've been on was supposed to be non-existent. I was slightly ashamed of my new-found ignorance.

The other classes were pretty much the same. I sat near the back. The teacher would take roll-call. Sometimes they would have me introduce myself, other times they skipped over it. Some of my classmates were friendly, while others I knew I had to be wary of. I already sensed a monster in my fifth period Gym class, and it wasn't the mythological kind.

Tom Wadpole, the official school bully, decided to make me his next target after he decided to corner me with his two thugs, who I'd call muscle 1 and muscle 2. That was all they were good for.

He slammed his hand against the locker to scare me, his tall and bulky stature made mine pale in comparison. His friends laughed when they noticed me give a fake flinch.

"I…don't want any trouble," I said slowly. Tom gave a gloating sneer, and I knew this cocky bastard wasn't going to listen. If we weren't in a school setting, I would have kicked his ass and left his body in a ditch. It's too bad I couldn't get myself expelled until my mission was over.

"You must think you're so great being a New Yorker," Tom said. I raised an eyebrow. Could this guy be any more immature? "If there's anything I know about New Yorkers, it's that their pockets are always filled with cash. So hand it over!"

I stared at Tom the Tadpole in disbelief. "You want my money? That's what this is about?" I gave a small laugh, infuriating the bullies further. "Oh my gods, and here I thought you idiots would come up with something more creative."

I noticed there was a crowd surrounding us. I hate audiences. Some of them were even snapping photos. Others were walking past briskly without a second glance in my direction, but none of them volunteered to help me. Where were the staff and security when you needed them? Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a security camera filming the scene.
Tom obviously couldn't take a verbal jab without getting physical. I saw him swing his fist towards my face, but his fist forcefully hit the wall after I ducked. Tom cradled his fist in pain, and soon his two thugs were trying to get me. I swerved passed their sloppy kicks and punches with ease, and I purposely situated myself between them and got them to knock each other out for me. Tom ran at me with fury, but I merely stepped to the side and the bastard tripped over one of his buddies' unconscious forms, falling flat on his face.

"Dumb ass," I muttered under my breath. I adjusted my glasses."Only inferior beings like you would pick on someone smaller."

Now that this troublesome mortal was dealt with, now I had an audience to tend with, and as if my day couldn't get any worse, a teacher finally arrived. Seeing the three bullies on the floor, and how I was the one closest to them, the teacher, naturally, called all of us to the principal's office.

Ms. Berkshire was surprised to see me. "William, why are you in here?"

"Ms. Berkshire, this student was found with three unconscious students," the teacher explained. I rolled my eyes. "This student instigated a school fight."

What did he just say?!

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, my sarcasm and annoyance barely veiled. "I'm new here, and it was these idiots that intruded on my personal space and demanded money from me. Tom," I said his name in disgust. "...didn't get what he wanted and tried to cause me bodily harm, which I merely avoided."

"He provoked me!" Tom cried out. "He taunted me!"

I was so going to bury this bastard outside of school.

"Do you have cameras here, Ms. Berkshire?" I asked with mock-sweetness. The principal nodded, while Tom's face paled. "Check them. You will find that I didn't aim a single blow. Everything I did was self-defense. Can I go now? I don't want to miss any more classes on my first day."

Ms. Berkshire sighed. "We'll check the cameras first to see if your story checks out. If it does, then you may go."

A half hour later, I was free to leave and the three thugs earned a one week suspension and harsh lecture from the principal who's now calling their parents. Rumors of my 'fight' with Tom Wadpole circulated the school and I was getting congratulatory pats on the back by people I didn't know, which irked me.

I finally entered my seventh period classroom. I wanted this day to be over. I haven't even started my mission and I already screwed up royally. I was early for once, and I sat down in the front row.

I was in the middle of reading one of the textbooks I got when I heard a girl ask, "is anyone sitting here?"

I shook my head while adjusting my glasses. "No one is..." My eyes met with the girl's, and both of us jumped back in surprise.

"Seth?!"

"Katie?!"

I hate high school.
"What are you doing here?" Katie demanded, sitting down next to me quickly, "and what's with the hairdo? You look like the mayor of nerd town."

"K-Katie, I can explain-!" Katie reached over and plucked the glasses off of my face. "H-hey, be careful with those!"

"Since when do you need glasses?" Katie asked pointedly with narrowed eyes, before twirling my glasses around her finger, much to my horror. If she broke those, Walt would kill me. "What was it that you once told me a while back? Something about having 20/8 vision?*

I quickly snatched the glasses back out of the daughter of Demeter's hands and snapped them back on, my hands grasping them firmly. "It's only temporary. I didn't know you attended this school."

"Of course not," Katie said with folded arms. "I told nobody but my family about where I live. You know the safety precautions."

"Right," I said a bit sheepishly. I should have known that without asking. Demigods rarely disclosed their home addresses to others because in this world, knowledge was power. You would never know if monsters were listening in, and any info on our addresses that got leaked out placed family members at risk. It's one of the reasons why no one at camp knew about Lucy, so I could keep her as safe as possible.

"You still didn't tell me what you're doing here."

"It's a long story, and I'm not permitted to share all of it," I added in quickly before Katie started interrogating me.

She huffed. "Can you at least tell me how long you're staying here? Or are you here because you want an education?"

"Trust me, if I had my way, I wouldn't be here at all." I muttered. "I hate high school."

"Don't tell me something already happened on your first day?" Katie said. A smirk was starting to appear on her face. When I didn't answer, her eyes widened further. "Something did happen! Come on, Seth. Spill it. What did you do this time?"

"Me? Why do you assume I started it?" I said with irritation.

Katie rolled her eyes. "Oh please, I know there are a lot of jerks in this place, and you are no pacifist."

"I can be a pacifist!" I argued. Katie gave a questionable look. "Okay, maybe when jerks aren't going around purposely trying to provoke me."

"Just tell me what happened, Seth," she replied. "My day's been too boring. I'm in need of an interesting story."

I sighed. "Alright, fine. I might have gotten what's his face to the principal's office…"
"Tom Wadpole?!

"Um, yeah, that's the bastard."

"That was you?!!" Katie exclaimed. "You got three of the biggest troublemakers in the school a one-week suspension?"

I only blinked. Oh my gods, the rumors traveled even faster around here than at camp.

"Wow," Katie gave a light laugh. "I applaud you, Seth. I really do. You're definitely going to set a record here."

"What record?" I mumbled. "I didn't get any trouble whatsoever. That's the good thing about cameras and the stupidity apparent in bullies. I don't intend to get expelled."

"I know," Katie said, "but the record I'm talking about is the amount of trouble you cause, but get away with."

I felt my lips turn up. "I'm flattered by your compliment."

"Don't get use to it," Katie warned. "Be more careful. I won't be able to bail you out if you do get into deep trouble."

"I'll try."

We heard the teacher start to take roll as my new classmates settled down, though there was still some chit-chatting going on. Katie gave me a slight nudge to the shoulder.

"You better tell me what you're here for," Katie more or less commanded. Ugh, I recalled the Stolls talking about Katie's bossiness, but I didn't think it was this much. "After school, got it?"

I only gave a grunt, briefly reminded of how Katie and Clare were related.

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Throughout class, Katie Gardner kept sneaking glances in Seth's direction.

Seth or 'William Fletcher' as he now called himself (she snorted aloud when she heard it), kept his head down, and kept writing rapidly in this notebook. His now dark grey eyes were directed only on the teacher and the lecture before he would write something down again. He had the appearance of an honors student that wanted nothing more but a good education. If Katie hadn't recognized him, she wouldn't have paid him a second thought, and she suspected that was his original intention. His disguise literally screamed out plain, ordinary, and 'don't look here!'

When the bell rang, Seth swiftly got up and out of the room before Katie could even get out of her chair. His quick departure left Katie frustrated.

"That jerk, he better not ditch me!" She thought as she hurriedly shoved her papers and books into her bag.

Seth was outside the classroom waiting for her.

"What took you so long?" he asked. Katie grew annoyed.

"Very funny," she said, before walking past him with her remaining dignity. She gave a small smirk when she heard Seth catch up with her step by step. "So what bus are you taking?"
"Bus?" Seth repeated, looking confused.

"Well, yeah. We take buses to get back home." Katie said slowly. Did he not know any of this? "I'm taking the one that goes through Lincoln Boulevard."

"Oh, um, I'm actually not taking the bus," he said.

"You're not?"

He shook his head. They were by her locker, and Katie hastily put on her coat and grabbed the books she needed and placed them into her bag. "I'm going to book a room at a nearby hotel."

Hotel…that could only mean Seth was staying short-term. So he wasn't here for normal reasons after all.

"How long are going to stay at this hotel?" she asked. Seth gave a shrug.

"A couple days," he said. "Maybe a week."

"That's it?" she said. "You came all the way from New York, just to attend my school for a few days?" Seth frowned. "What person does that?"

"That's my business," he said icily. His sudden cold tone nearly caught her by surprise. Seth stared at her blankly, his eyes so empty it sent chills up Katie's spine. A second later, Seth lowered his gaze, and said more gently, "don't worry about what I'm here for, Katie. Just pretend I've always been here. It'll be easier for both of us."

"Seth," Katie started, a bit hesitant. "Is something wrong?"

"You have to clarify what you mean."

"I saw your note," she whispered, closing her locker quietly. The two of them headed towards the entrance. "The one you gave Chiron to leave us with? You left that letter without even a proper goodbye. Will was really angry, and the others were ticked off."

"What about you?" he asked without looking at her. They were finally outside the school. All of the students were talking and running to their buses. "How did you feel?"

"I…I was confused."

"Confused," he repeated softly. "I thought my letter was straightforward."

"It is," she said, "but it's not the content that confuses me, but the reason. Why did you write the letter in the first place?"

"It's for Will's sake," he answered briskly. "I didn't say anything about leaving camp during the beginning of the year, and he confronted me about it at Lee's funeral. I owed it to him." He gave a light chuckle. "I guess that didn't work."

"But if the letter is meant for Will, why did you ask Chiron to give it to Annabeth?" Katie said narrowly. Seth didn't answer. "Will should be the one with the letter instead."

"It doesn't matter who has it, as long as all of you have seen and read it." he murmured, and then he noticed something of interest. "Is that your bus, Katie? It looks like it's about to leave."

"Huh?" Katie turned and saw her bus closing the doors. "Oh Zeus!"
She ran as quick as her legs could take her, but the bus was already taking off, inevitably leaving her behind. She felt Seth run past her, and soon, she saw the child of Artemis banging his fist on the front doors of the bus. The driver forced the bus to a stop, much to the occupants' interest and aggravation.

Katie soon caught up with him, out of breath. "Thanks."

"No problem," Seth said. "So I'll see you tomo-?" His sentence was cut off when he felt her dragging him inside the bus. The driver quickly shut the doors after they entered. "Katie, why are you…"

Katie grew flustered, her face red from sweat and the cold breeze earlier. "Quit asking questions and sit down."

The bus was relatively two-thirds full. They eventually found an empty seat and sat together.

"Alright, Katie," Seth started. "Why did you drag me in here? I told you I was going to stay at a hotel."

"You're going to stay at my place," she declared. What possessed Katie to say that, she didn't know, but the more she thought about it, the better the idea seemed. She rarely had friends stay over, especially demigod friends, and her house had a guest room available so…

Seth looked at her in disbelief. "You're kidding."

"I'm not," she said. "You can say it's reimbursement for helping me get on here earlier."

"B-but this is too sudden!" he protested. "What about your father? He doesn't even know I'm coming over! I can't just barge in unannounced! That's rude."

Katie rolled her eyes. Of course Seth would be concerned about proper manners.

"You got my permission," she said. "As long as you have that, my dad won't have any complaints so long as you don't cause any trouble around the house, which I know you won't. We have a guest room available, and you're only staying a few days. Why stay at some shabby, run-down hotel with awful food when you can stay somewhere better for free?"

Seth replied, "I do have more than enough money for a good hotel, but if you and your father are really fine with me staying over…"

"We are," she insisted.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "Thanks for letting me stay. I'll be sure to make it up to you."

Katie gave a small smile. "Worry about that later. You got your stuff with you?"

"Sort of," Seth said. "It will be…on the way."

Before Katie could ask him what he meant, the bus had finally come to a stop in front of her neighborhood. She motioned for Seth to follow her, and the two of them along with a couple others got off the bus and headed home.

Since her house was a fifteen minute walk from the bus stop, Katie started to prep Seth on what to expect when staying at her home.

"My dad works at home," she began. "Whenever I bring friends over, he can be a bit nosy. So if he
starts asking you strange, awkward questions—feel free to call me as soon as possible so I can put a stop to that."

"What kind of questions am I expecting?"

"Trust me, you will know when you hear them," Katie said, shuddering slightly. She remembered the last time her dad more or less interrogated one of her guy friends from school. It didn't help that he owned a shot gun. "He does it to 'protect me'. He does the same thing whenever Miranda is around too."

"So he's the protective father sort?" Seth questioned.

"More like over-protective," she corrected. "Just try to bear with him. Giving him respect helps too."

"I'll be sure to do that," he muttered.

After some more walking, she and Seth finally arrived in front of her single family home. The front lawn was filled with dried out flowers and plants. The driveway was clear, and the brick house and closed windows gave the house a serene feel. Katie frowned when she noticed the flowers were on the verge of dehydration. She lifted a hand over the plants, and seconds later, the flowers straightened up, the colors grew more vibrant, and the grass became greener. Seth watched her with awe.

"I always wonder how Demeter kids can do that," he murmured while looking at the red roses. "Do you just will the plants to life or what?"

"Kind of," she said. "It's a bit hard to explain, but it depends on what I'm feeling too. If I'm in a good mood, the plants and vegetation around me just become more alive."

They reached the door. Katie took out a key and opened it, a chime signifying their arrival. "Oh yeah, it's best if you shed that disguise, Seth. You don't need to be 'William Fletcher' here."

Seth briefly hesitated before he took off his glasses and brushed his hair back to how it was. Katie gave an amused look. It amazed her how Seth's appearance could change so drastically. Instead of looking like a nerdy geek, the child of Artemis now looked more than decent. Katie and the others would never compliment him on that aspect though, for his sake.

"Dad, I'm home!" she announced as the two of them stepped inside. "Dad?"

She heard Seth take a small step back as her father finally came out of his work room. A slightly chubby, brown-haired man with a mustache walked over to her with open arms. Katie immediately stepped forward as her father embraced her, his blue-green eyes looking at her warmly behind his rimless glasses.

"How's your third day, Katie?" her father, Edward Gardner, asked. "Anyone give you any trouble?"

Katie shook her head. "No, dad. No one gave me any trouble. You don't need to worry about me so much."

"It's a father's duty to look out for his beautiful daughters!" her father exclaimed. "What would your mother say if I didn't protect you and Miranda?"

"I think she just tell us to eat more cereal," Katie muttered. She noticed Seth by the door still, looking very out of place. "Dad, I want you to meet a friend of mine from camp."
Almost immediately, her dad's countenance became less friendly and sterner. "A friend, you say?"
He walked over with Katie under his arm still. He stared at Seth intently, and Katie knew that her
father was trying to appear intimidating. She smacked a hand to her forehead.

"Dad," she started.

"What's your name, young man?" her father demanded.

"Seth Hunter, sir."

"What is your relationship with my daughter?"

"We're friends, sir."

"Really?" he questioned, causing Seth to look confused. "You two are just friends. I can't help but
notice that you are quite a handsome fellow. Probably used to the attention of girls, aren't you?"

"Excuse me?" Seth said, apprehensive.

Despite the warning looks Katie was throwing at him, her father paid no heed to them and continued
to interrogate him relentlessly. "A grown boy like you must want a girlfriend of his own."

The horrified look on Seth's face made Katie want to scream in aggravation.

"What in Hades, dad!" Katie shouted. "Seth and I—we are not having a romantic relationship! Quit
interrogating him!"

"So you are not currently dating this boy here?" he asked narrowly.

"No! Dad, Seth is a child of Artemis! He doesn't date!" Katie nearly shouted at him. Her statement
unknowingly shocked Seth and her father.

Her dad blinked in surprise. "A child of Artemis?" He turned to look at Seth curiously. "You're a son
of Artemis?"

"Um, y-yes, sir," Seth said quietly, looking very awkward. Katie felt like giving him all of her
sympathy.

"You really don't date?"

"No sir," he answered.

"So are you like, asexual or aromantic?"

"I'm both, sir." Seth said tightly. "I can't see myself in a relationship, nor do I want to partake in
anything that involves love."

"So you are against love?"

"When it comes to other people, like my friends for instance, I can tolerate it." he said carefully. "I
don't care if others are having relationships, as long as it doesn't involve me."

"So you are in complete abstinence?" her father questioned. Seth gave a hesitant nod. Katie noticed
that her father was now looking at Seth with approval. "Very well, Seth Hunter. You have earned
my permission to spend time with my daughter, Katie." Katie gave a snort.
"I'm glad, sir," Seth said, giving an uneasy smile.

"Dad, Seth needs a place to stay for a few days, and I offered to take him in. He can use the spare guest room, and I'll make sure he doesn't bother you when you're working."

"That's fine," her father said dismissively. "Just help yourself to whatever you need, Seth. All I ask is that you look out for my daughter at that school."

Katie rolled her eyes. "Dad, I don't need looking after!"

"If only you would agree to go to that all-girls school, we wouldn't be having this discussion!" her father shot back, causing Katie to cross her arms and pout.

"Of course, sir," Seth answered. "I'll try my best." Her father gave a nod before he returned to his workroom. She and Seth later went upstairs into the guest room and started setting his stuff down on the spare mattress.

Katie immediately started apologizing once they were alone. "Oh gods, Seth. I'm so sorry my dad had to put you on the spot like that! It must have been embarrassing."

"It's alright," Seth said while taking out his books. "Although, I'm curious of how you knew I don't date. I never told you."

"I have friends who are asexual, aromantic, or mistaken themselves as one," Katie told him. "I recognize the signs. I noticed how you never seem to be interested in talking about girls or couples. You have that disinterested air about you. At first, I thought you played for the other team."

Seth appeared confused. "What other team?"

"Guys," Katie said bluntly. "I thought you liked guys instead of girls."

There was a brief moment of silence as Seth took in what she said.

"You thought I liked guys…romantically?" he said slowly. Katie nodded, sheepish. However, she noticed Seth's expression was one of neutrality. He didn't seem offended.

"Yeah," she said quietly. How did this conversation get awkward so fast? "That's what happened with one of my friends. He thought he was asexual at first since girls didn't interest him, but it turned out he liked guys instead."

"I guess that's a common mistake," he muttered.

"So are you?" Katie asked. "Are you really an aromantic asexual or is it a mistake?"

Seth chuckled and shook his head. "I'm not mistaken, Katie. Women, men, there's no difference. Neither party interests me. Though, if it was a year ago, I would definitely be classified as straight."

"So you were interested in girls at one point?" Katie asked, interested.

He nodded. "I find many of them to be good company, some I also find attractive. I don't remember paying any attention to guys in that regard, so it's very unlikely that I'm gay or bisexual."

"If you don't mind me asking," Katie said with a small smirk. Seth instantly had his guard up.

"Which girls do you find attractive? You ever had a crush on any of them before?"

Instead of being nervous like Katie expected, Seth answered frankly, "I never had a crush. The girls I
find to be interesting and attractive I can only see them as friends, nothing more."

"Which girls are you talking about?"

"You, for example," Seth pointed out. "I like hanging out with you, but it doesn't mean I want to
date you. No offense or anything."

"None taken," she said. "I don't see you like that either. If only my dad knew that in the
beginning…" She sighed. She didn't want to remember anymore. "Who else?"

"Annabeth is another. I like talking to smart girls. Annabeth always brings up something thought-
provoking. I enjoy talking to her about these topics immensely, as long as it isn't all about
architecture. That can get boring real quick. But like I said before, I can only see her as a friend, a
best friend even, but a friend nonetheless."

"Plus, she's already taken," Katie added. "Do you know if she and Percy Jackson are together?" Seth
was taken aback.

"T-they're dating?!

Katie rolled her eyes.

"I forgot how dense you can be. Why is it always the guys?" Katie muttered. She continued before
Seth could start protesting. "Any other girls?"

"Thalia Grace," Seth replied after a moment's pause. "She has a very headstrong personality that
makes her admirable. She's also very confident and after getting to know her more, I also notice how
she also has a gentle and caring side to her as well. Now that she's the lieutenant of the Hunters, she's
become a remarkable leader." Seth smiled briefly, his silver eyes directed at her. "Did I ever tell you
how Thalia was and still is my role model?"

Katie was surprised. "No, you didn't."

"She was my role model ever since I heard her story," Seth informed her. "I thought to myself,
'Wow, that's a girl who I would like to fight side by side with. That's someone who succeeded in
protecting those closest to her.' Maybe it was because I was very impressionable. Regardless, I'm
glad I was given the chance to know Thalia personally."

"Sounds like you held Thalia up on a very high pedestal," Katie remarked, "but did you ever feel
anything towards her? See her as more than a friend?"

"I'm not sure," Seth answered, narrowing his eyes in deep thought. "I can't tell if those 'feelings' are
romantic, or just a form of awe and admiration." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter anymore. I see
Thalia only as a friend these days, and she's a hunter. Any love is out of the equation."

"That's too bad," Katie said softly, and then she moved on to the real topic she wanted to go over
with Seth. "What about…what about Clare?"

"Clare?" he repeated. There was an edge to his tone, and for a second, Katie felt a wave of
animosity hit her. She stared at Seth warily for a moment before snapping out of it, confused of why
she just thought Seth was somebody else.

She nodded. "I remembered how the two of you were close friends before she left. Back then, we
barely talked, but I always noticed how you and Clare would always spend time together whenever
one of you was free. You must feel something! As her half-sister, I know I do, but you were closer to
her than I ever was."
“What's your point?” Seth said after a moment. “I know bringing her up isn't easy for you, Katie. You must have a reason for doing so. I know how much you care about her.”

Katie swallowed heavily. Seth's words hit her right in the spot. If Thalia was Seth's role model, then Clare was hers. She always admired her older sister's abilities over photosynthesis and plant manipulation, and her knowledge on toxins and healing herbs seemed endless. She admired the way Clare carried herself proudly and represented their cabin to the best of her ability. She trusted Clare with her problems, and Clare would always give her good advice and cheer her up in the process.

It's the reason why Clare's betrayal left her so devastated.

"I want to save her," she finally uttered. "I want to bring Clare back. I want to bring my sister back." She paused to catch her breath. "I…I know I can't do it alone, Seth. I know it's selfish of me to ask you this, but could you somehow convince Clare to return to how she was?"

Seth stared at her blankly. "Katie, what you're asking for…might not be possible."

"But I have to try!" she argued. There was desperation etched in her voice. "She's my sister, Seth! I have to try!"

"Do you know what Clare has done?" Seth said. His silver eyes turning so cold that Katie felt herself involuntarily shiver. "She's a traitor, Katie. She has harmed my friends numerous times. Percy still has a scar on his arm to prove that, and she tried killing him before. I nearly died from one of her poisoned weapons. She also injured me so badly I fainted from blood loss."

"W-why are you telling me this?" Katie faltered. She realized how expressionless Seth was, and his stoic countenance suddenly angered her. How could he be so calm about this? How could he not care after everything he and Clare went through? Why did he focus on the bad and not the good? "Do you think she's not worth saving? Is that it?"

"I can't answer that," he said, still calm. "Whether someone is worth saving or not isn't up to us. I told you Clare's crimes in order to tell you how loyal she is to Kronos' cause. Anyone with that level of dedication and loyalty will be near impossible to revert back."

"Are you telling me to give up?"

Seth shook his head. "I think you are very strong, Katie. It's hard to keep believing someone will change. I've given up all hope of getting any of those traitors back on our side."

Katie narrowed her eyes at Seth's callous confession. "I don't believe you. There's no way you've lost all hope…" She trailed off when Seth threw her an intense stare. "No…you didn't!"

"I have," he insisted. "Nothing will change that. Think about it: we are in the midst of a war. Each person is responsible for whichever side they choose. If we are on the side of the gods, it is only logical that we treat each and every being that isn't on our side as the enemy. Don't you agree?"

Katie hesitated, "well, yes, but-!"

"There are no 'but's'." Seth interrupted. "To show such opinions is to show weakness. It also allows the enemy an opportunity to strike where you are vulnerable, and I don't want that to happen to you, Katie. I guarantee that if Clare heard what you just told me, she will not turn for the better. She will not show you sympathy. Rather, she will try to convert you to her cause, and your notions of trying to save her will be all she needs to gain your loyalty."

Katie felt her body tremble from Seth's words. She couldn't deny that there was some logic to them,
but she couldn't believe them! She's been dedicated to saving Clare for so long that she couldn't just go back on her goals like that.

"W-why are you saying such things?" Katie asked. Seth tilted his head to the side, his eyes narrowing at her remark. "I thought you would show some compassion. You and Clare were once friends! You would always be friendly to newcomers and kids, and be unbiased when it came to our godly parentage. That's why so many people at camp like hanging out with you. You were someone who would give others a second chance."

"Is that what you really think of me?" Seth asked quietly. Katie didn't answer. "Then I'm sorry to disappoint you, Katie, but the person you just described doesn't completely fit me. Not anymore."

"T-that can't be true!" Katie protested. She felt like there was a lump in her throat. "Y-you're lying to me! You have to be!"

"I'm sorry Katie, but I'm not." Seth answered softly. "I don't lie to friends and people I care about. That fact has never changed." He looked at her curiously. "Are you shocked, Katie? Were you expecting me to fit your idyllic description? Perhaps I did once, but that was a long time ago. I no longer give people second chances unless they prove me otherwise, and proving it will be very difficult."

He made a move to get up. He snapped his fingers and suddenly three small bags appeared out of nowhere and landed right by his feet. Seth quickly unzipped its contents and started to set them up on the empty desk on the other side of the room. Katie sat there very still, her countenance stunned of what Seth told her and what she had just seen him do.

"How long?" Katie finally uttered.

"What?"

She repeated herself, slower this time. "How long did you start believing in such things? How long have you been this...cold?"

"Cold?" Seth echoed. "I'm hurt that you would say such a thing. I'm not cold, but honest. I only told you, and you alone, what I truly think of the matter you addressed to me. To call me cold, would mean you don't approve of my beliefs?"

"I don't approve of them," Katie answered. "I can never go along with beliefs that forsake compassion and our ability to forgive."

"Forgiveness shouldn't be freely given," Seth said. "It should be like a luxury item that many vie for, but few obtain. I never said I can't forgive. It all depends on the context it's used in. I can easily forgive, say, a person who accidentally spilled water over my stuff. I forgive them because I know they didn't mean it. I can also forgive someone who has committed a major wrong, and strives to make up for that wrong two times over."

"Then why can't you forgive Clare?" Katie said bitterly. "She was your friend, Seth!"

Seth didn't bother to cease his unpacking, his gaze directed only at his things. "Whatever relationships I had with them are irrelevant. Clare has not made a single move to make up for her atrocious actions. Not a single one. I can't forgive her."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from you!" Katie exclaimed angrily. "You're basically telling me that your past friendship with Clare is nothing to you! That it's 'irrelevant' to you!"
Then, Seth had the gall to turn around and smile at her. "What's with the anger, Katie? I get how Clare is your sister, your family, and it's hard to accept that salvation may not be reachable for them. But that doesn't mean you can shove your opinions down my throat."

"I…" She couldn't find the words. Was she forcing Seth to accept things her way?

"You're right in assuming that I do not care for my friendship with Clare. I would have cared if Clare was on our side, but she made her choice and I've made mine. Katie, you must understand what an enemy truly means. You can't let your past relationship dictate your treatment of them. It wouldn't be…fair."

"Fair?" she said incredulously. "In what way does any of this involve fairness?"

"Everything, of course," he replied, as he stood up to face her. "You called Clare your sister, right? What about Luke Castellan? In every way, he would also be considered your family. You and he would be aunt and nephew. Yet, I don't see you showing sympathy towards him as you do Clare."

"T-that's going too far!" Katie argued. "By your reasoning, every one of us would be family! Even the Titans are part of it!"

Seth's eyes darkened, his lips turned slightly upward. "Exactly. Now, I don't want to get into the complexities of our family tree, but do you see why I don't factor in our relationships? Such things will cloud our minds from the main goal: to defeat Kronos and his supporters. We can't defeat them halfheartedly, you know? Your goal of 'saving' Clare when she clearly doesn't want to be saved is a fine example, and why do you pursue this? All because Clare is your sister, and you care about her because of this trivial fact. But let me ask you something Katie: does Clare see you the same way?"

His words sliced into her mind like a knife. Katie knelt down on the mattress, her hands placed in front of her. Did Clare see her the same way she did? She'd been trying so hard to bring her back and yet, all her work would be for nothing if Clare didn't return the sentiment. Was this what Seth was trying to tell her? Warn her?

"It doesn't matter to me," she finally whispered. She shook her head rapidly, as if to shake the doubts that suddenly appeared out of her mind. "I must believe she can come back, and I will do my best in persuading her to do so."

"Suit yourself." Seth replied dismissively. "I pray that your determination and willpower is as strong as you claim, even if it is fruitless."

She clenched her teeth tightly, pissed off by Seth's flippant attitude. "I thought you would understand where I was coming from, Seth. I never thought you would go against my actions."

Seth only shrugged. "If I've offended you, then I do apologize. But I won't take my words back. This is what I think, and I won't be changing them any time soon."

"What happened to you?" Katie cried. "You were never like this before, Seth! The Seth I knew would have agreed with me. I remember how you always ranted about the hunters being too stoic and merciless, and now you are no better than them! In fact, I think you are even worse!"

"The world is a cruel and unkind place," Seth said, his voice still calm despite hearing her hysteria. "I've seen things that most won't be able to stand or comprehend. Maybe I have changed Katie, but it was inevitable. If you knew even a fraction of what I've experienced, then you will realize why I am who I am."

Katie only continued to stare at him, watching his countenance very closely. She unexpectedly
noticed that Seth never once raised his voice, or showed any hint of anger despite the words she used to purposely make him snap. In the past, she recalled Miranda telling her about Seth's fight with Zoë Nightshade. Seth was so expressive back then, not like how he was now. Instead, the child of Artemis was calm, with an irritably blank expression. There was a very brief flash of sadness in his silver eyes. It vanished so quickly that Katie thought she imagined it.

"If you don't mind," Seth started. "Can you please give me some time to myself? I like sorting through my things alone, and I've already wasted enough of your time. Do you remember what the AP Literature homework was?"

"Oh, um, I think we were supposed to read over *Hamlet* Act I." she recalled.

"Thanks," he said, and with bags in both hands, he proceeded to empty the rest of its contents in the empty closet. Katie took that as her signal to leave.

Unbeknownst to Katie Gardner, the moment she closed the door, Seth had already finished unpacking and quickly finished setting up the bed. He regarded the door thoughtfully a moment later, an uncharacteristic smirk on his face.

"We sure have some interesting friends Seth," he remarked. "I look forward to meeting more of them personally."

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Chapter End Notes

*20/8 vision is the best recorded vision for humans. Seeing as how Seth also has night vision, it would make sense for his vision to be very acute.*
The smell of bacon and eggs woke Katie up.

She yawned and stretched in her bed, kicking off the covers and slipping on warm slippers. She absentmindedly rubbed the weariness out of her eyes and checked the digital clock on the wall, and was briefly shocked to see it wasn't even past seven. She put on a robe quickly and went downstairs to see who got up at such a bizarre hour.

She found Seth Hunter in the kitchen…cooking.

Seth heard her approach. He smiled. "Good morning, Katie. I didn't expect you to get up this early. The bacon isn't ready yet."

Katie only stared at him. She noticed the toast and eggs already prepared on three plates. There were even hash-browns, her favorite breakfast food.

"You…you can cook?" she said in disbelief.

He nodded. "I learned."

"When?"

He flipped the bacon into the air expertly. "January of this year."

Around the time you left camp, Katie noted. Lately, she's been learning all kinds of new things from Seth. She thought she knew him pretty well. They've been friends for nearly three years. Their debate from yesterday proved her wrong. As well as that new trick Seth had shown her with his bags, and now Seth was a cook?

"You can dig in, you know," Seth replied. "Bacon's almost ready, and the eggs don't taste good when they're cold."

"Um, okay," Katie muttered, not knowing what to think. "Did you get up this early just to make us breakfast?"

"Yes, and I had some things to look over before school." Seth said. He walked over to the table and started placing strips of bacon in each plate. He paused at Katie's plate. "How much do you want?"

"Uh, just three strips," she said. Seth gave her the desired amount, and then he immediately started washing the pan at the sink. She took a bite of her food. "Wow, this taste really good."

"I'm glad you like it," he said, taking off his apron before sitting down next to her. "It's the least I can do for allowing me to stay here."

"It's so good." Katie munched on her buttered toast. "If I can get a great breakfast everyday with you
here, I don't care how long you stay."

Seth gave a small laugh. "I can cook you lunch and dinner if you and your father don't mind." Katie nearly choked in surprise.

"Y-you can do that?" Katie exclaimed. "I mean, breakfast is one thing, but aren't meals even harder to prepare?"

"Do you doubt my ability?" Seth said teasingly. "Then prepare to be amazed!"

He finally picked up his knife and fork and started eating. While they ate, Katie noticed how Seth seemed so normal. This was the Seth she was used to seeing, who she wanted to be friends with. Not like how he was yesterday, so stiff and emotionless.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Katie questioned.

"Of course I'm okay," Seth said, confused. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Katie shrugged, "I don't know, you just...seem so different yesterday. When we were having that debate, you seemed like another person."

Seth frowned. "Debate?"

"You know- the one about Clare?" Katie reminded him.

Seth narrowed his eyes, his eyebrows scrunched up in deep thought. Then, his face gave way to recognition. "Oh, right. That debate. I'm really sorry if I unsettled you yesterday. I felt like you were avoiding me afterwards."

Katie swallowed, feeling guilty. She had been avoiding Seth yesterday. She didn't want to accept that what he said about Clare could be true. She needed time alone to resort her thoughts, and she could only do so without Seth's lingering presence.

"Sorry," Katie began. "I needed some time alone to reflect. It must have seemed like I was angry at you."

"I know what you mean," Seth said. "Sometimes, solitude has its benefits."

They continued eating, this time in silence. Her father joined them a few minutes later. Katie would glance up occasionally from her plate, and she would see Seth and her father talking about work, school, and other things. Suddenly, her father gave a booming laugh at something Seth had said. Katie smiled to herself. She knew her father and Seth would get along.

After breakfast ended, she and Seth were soon waiting at the bus stop. Seth had put on his glasses again, and his reddish brown hair was back to nerd mode. She crossed her arms to keep the warmth from escaping. Her knee-length skirt and dark stockings didn't do much to block out the chills. She sighed in relief when the bus finally arrived. A blast of warm air greeted her and Seth, and Katie noticed one of her mortal friends signaling for her to sit next to her. She hesitated for a moment. She didn't want Seth to think she ditched him.

Seth noticed. "Go ahead. I can sit by myself."

"You sure?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not a child. I can handle being alone for a while."
"I was being nice, idiot." Katie grumbled. Seth gave a light chuckle before they parted. Katie quickly sat down beside her blonde friend, Bethany.

"Who's he, Katie?" she asked.

"A friend from camp," she answered. "He's checking out our school for a bit. His name is Se-William Fletcher."

"He's kind of cute."

Katie almost choked. "Cute? Him? Have you seen his hairstyle? It's like he's trying to out-geek us all."

Bethany shrugged, "I don't know. It must be my fetish for redheads."

"He's not a redhead," Katie pointed out. "He has auburn hair."

"Close enough."

"You're not crushing on him, are you?" Katie said seriously. Bethany stared at her for a moment, before she smirked.

"Why? Is he your boyfriend?"

"No!" Katie said, heat rising to her cheeks. "We're just friends."

"Relax, Kate." Bethany said. "I was only teasing. I don't plan on dating for awhile."

Katie let out a mental sigh of relief. Bethany was someone who fell very deep in love and would commit almost all of her time and energy into a relationship. That also meant that if she got rejected (which Seth would no doubt do), she would end up having massive heartbreak. She had recently broken up with her boyfriend of two years, and she had spent yesterday at home crying over it.

"Anyway," Bethany began, "what did I miss yesterday?"

"Nothing much..." Katie started, and she continued to fill her in as the bus drove on.

-0-

No sooner had I finally reached my World History class, the teacher announced a pop quiz.

Everyone started groaning and complaining as I settled in a desk near the rear window. There were a couple of kids in the back giving me these amused glances that suggested trouble as I placed my books on the desk. I tried to ignore their rude stares as I quickly took out a pencil. The teacher started passing out the quiz by row while saying something about how this quiz was on the course outline he had passed out yesterday. I didn't attend his class yesterday.

When I finally got the quiz in hand and scanned through all the questions, I instantly relaxed. There were only eight short answer questions that went over Mesopotamia and the Neolithic Revolution, topics Lynetta already taught and tested me on. There were also two bonus questions discussing Ancient Egypt. This was going to be a piece of cake.

It took me a while to complete it due to my dyslexia, but I have already memorized the spelling for any important vocabulary at Lynetta's urging. I was able to finish before half of my peers.

"Pass them up!" the teacher announced.
The papers were taken care of, and the instructor informed us that he would have them graded by tomorrow while he put on this documentary on Mesopotamian culture, which made me want to sleep. Instead of the film, I found my eyes looking outside the window where some students were using the tennis courts, while another group was having a soccer match.

The rest of my classes proceeded in the same format. Teacher handed out some worksheets for us to do, and instructed us on the subject using examples and such, and so on. I was bored out of my mind. My ADHD was acting up: my hands and legs kept fidgeting, wanting to move about and stretch. It was only until my fifth period gym class that I was finally able to do just that.

I changed into a plain T-shirt and sweatpants before following my peers outside. From what I heard, we were going to play… baseball?

"Jordan! Richardson!" the PE teacher, who also happened to be the baseball coach, called up two boys. "Start picking your teams!"

I stared at the coach in disbelief. Wow, what a way to boost self-esteem. While everyone else started to get called on by one of the two guys, who were probably on the baseball team, the last ones were left feeling like shit. Given my nerdy and 'weak' appearance, I wasn't surprised that I was the second to last person picked. I was on Jordan's team.

The game started. Everyone lined up to bat. The team captain, Jordan, only shot me a narrowed, condescending look and told me to sit out at the bleachers. Despite how much I wanted to punch that arrogance out of the mortal, I complied willingly. I had better things to do than participate in a baseball game, and I could use this time to plan.

So far, I had no clue as to what I was doing here. Since I was keeping my aura down, no monsters appeared. The same situation applied with Katie, since Demeter children typically had indiscernible auras. I was in for a loop. I didn't know where to start. Even if I uncapped my aura, monsters that weren't supposed to be involved here would show up and ruin things. I wasn't even sure if there's any vital evidence here. What could the Titan army do with a school?

I pondered through these issues deeply, not noticing how the game was soon drawing to a close. It was only when the teacher called me out that I snapped out of my thoughts.

"William Fletcher!" the teacher shouted. "Get down here! You're up!"

Jordan opposed, naturally. "Coach, we're already at the last inning! We can get someone else to-!"

"Everyone needs to participate," he interrupted, giving a disapproving glance at Jordan. "Give Fletcher a chance to play."

I leaped down from the bleachers and took the offered bat in my hands. I realized that the bases were loaded, and there were already two outs. The score was also very close, which meant I was the deciding factor of the game. What a predicament. No wonder Jordan wanted someone else to bat. The pitcher gave a smirk when he saw me, probably thinking their side already won.

I held the bat steady, wondering what I should do. I always had a good arm at baseball, and with Walt's training, I should be able to see the ball fly towards me. The only problem was that I didn't want to stand out. I already garnered enough unwanted attention from yesterday's fight.

The pitcher threw a fast ball, and I purposely didn't move the bat.

"Strike one!" the catcher shouted. I saw Jordan putting his hands to his face.
The second time the pitcher released the ball, I swung the bat, and the ball instantly flew out of the field. Everyone was so stunned that they froze in place, staring at the ball in disbelief.

"HOME RUN!" the coach yelled.

I started running at a casual pace. Mentally, I was cursing at myself for hitting too hard. I didn't mean to make a home run, but at least that would teach Jordan and everyone else not to judge a book by its cover. I ran through all the bases, the coach blew the whistle and class was officially over.

Jordan and Richardson met me at the changing room.

"What do you want?" I said, making sure to keep my voice even. I noticed that they positioned themselves close, standing in front of me. They also blocked my only exit. I casually moved my hand inside my locker, my fingers grasping the hilt of one of my Stygian Iron daggers. I knew Jordan was mortal, but for Richardson, I couldn't be certain. If he was a monster, this could get ugly.

Jordan appeared sheepish. "I uh, want to apologize for treating you like that earlier. I shouldn't have judged you like that."

I gave a look of surprise. "Apology…accepted. Why are you both here?"

Richardson answered. "Coach wants to extend an invitation for you to try out for the baseball team."

"It was a lucky hit." I insisted, still not relaxing my hold on my weapon. "I'm sorry, but I'll have to decline your offer. I...I have poor vision. I won't do well in the field."

Jordan nodded, not pushing the issue. "Well, um, just think about it. Contact one of us if you change your mind. We cool?" He held out a hand.

"Yeah, thanks for offering." I said, shaking it. The two of them gave awkward glances before they left me alone to change. I finally let go of my weapon and let out an inaudible sigh of relief.

Baseball team huh? I would have accepted under different circumstances. I've never participated in a sports team before. I mentally jotted it down as one of the things I wished to experience in the future, once this whole mess with Kronos got cleared up.

I concluded my second day at Madison with AP Literature. I sat down beside Katie as the teacher, Mr. Eliot, asked all of us to open our books. We were going over the first act of Hamlet.

I absolutely adored Hamlet. There was something about this character, about his inner conflicts that resonated with me the first time I laid my eyes on this masterpiece. I've read through nearly all of Shakespeare's works: Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, and the dreaded Romeo and Juliet to name a few. Aside from the last piece, each of them gave me a shred of enjoyment, but none of them gained my enthusiasm like Hamlet did. I've read through Hamlet so many times I unintentionally committed several scenes to memory.

We were going through Act one, scene two, when Mr. Eliot asked if anyone would like to read one of the passages aloud. Much to Katie's surprise, I volunteered.

I cleared my throat, and read aloud what Hamlet said to his mother, Queen Gertrude:
"Seems, madam! Nay it is; I know not 'seems.'
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play:
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

"Very good, William," Mr. Eliot praised. "Would you like to venture a guess as to what Hamlet meant in a modern phrasing?"

"Of course," I said, smiling slightly. Now this was a topic I've never got the chance to share until now. "Hamlet's mother, the Queen, insists on having Hamlet get over his state of mourning after his father's untimely death. Hamlet, being the loyal son he is, tells his mother to back off and accuses her of being pretentious."

Mr. Eliot drew a look of interest. "How did you arrive to that conclusion?"

"The word choice, Mr. Eliot," I answered. "The word 'seems' is repeated here, and the phrases 'forced breath' and 'actions that a man might play' all suggest an act of deception. Hamlet lists out examples of how a person can pretend to be something they are not and he rejects doing each notion quite vigorously with the word, 'nor'."

"Interesting process," Mr. Eliot said. "You seem to understand Hamlet very well, William. I also know that you are new to our school. Did your other school go through this book before?"

"No, sir," I said. "Hamlet is my favorite play. I read it before many times, and gained a better understanding through it." I noticed Katie rolling her eyes and mumbling 'Nerd'. I ignored her.

"Why is Hamlet your favorite?" he asked. "Wouldn't you prefer a play with a happier ending?"

"I believe tragedies are what allow us to sympathize and understand the characters better." I said softly. "Tragedies aren't popular, but they are more memorable than stories that end with good overcoming evil. They teach us the consequences of wrong choices, and I believe it is in our interest to avoid making those same mistakes. We would rather see what results in a bad choice done by a fictional character than a real person, right?"

"That's true." Mr. Eliot said, impressed. "But why Hamlet? Why not Macbeth or Romeo and Juliet? They are also notable tragedies."

I gave an amused smile. "They may be tragedies sir, but the reasons for those tragedies differ and could have been prevented if not for greed and unlawful lust. Hamlet, unlike Macbeth and Romeo, wasn't given an alternative. The situation was thrust upon him, and it was one he couldn't avoid."

At this, one of the other male students who sat diagonally behind me raised his hand. Mr. Eliot called. "Yes, Noah?"

"I disagree," Noah said to me. "I read Hamlet before, and I agree with a lot of the stuff you said, but Hamlet must have a choice in the matter. He could have ignored the ghost's warnings, and not carry out his revenge. That could have saved him and those around him their lives."
"Maybe," I conceded. "Except Hamlet is devoted to his father. We know that Hamlet loved his father because he mourned for him longer than anyone else. After hearing his father's ghost's message of his uncle murdering him, how can he not pursue a quest of truth?"

"The ghost could have been a fraud." Noah pointed out.

"Yes, but the authenticity isn't certain." I said. "You can argue that curiosity is what led to Hamlet's path of vengeance, but you can also blame the people he is surrounded with. His uncle sees him as a potential threat to the throne, and his mother distrusts him. He had no one to lean on besides Horatio, and his best friend isn't always around."

"There's also Ophelia," one of the girls pointed out.

"She's unreliable. Her father and brother can't be trusted. She's guilty by association."

Our discussion ended when Mr. Eliot insisted that we move on to another scene. We were assigned to read and annotate Act 2 by next week. The bell rang, and Katie and I left together. We didn't talk much on the bus, but Katie introduced me to her childhood friend, Bethany. We made some small talk before the two girls moved on to other topics that I didn't pay much attention to. I was still stuck on what I should be doing here.

After dinner, I was looking around Katie's home when I spotted another room I have yet to venture in. When I opened it, I was greeted with a grand piano. There was a white covering over it, and the bench was shoved inwards. Was Katie a pianist?

I heard Katie walk up behind me. "You noticed it."

"Do you play?"

She shook her head. "It's Miranda's. I play the flute."

"I didn't know," I said. Katie rolled her eyes.

"Well, I used to take flute lessons. I can still play fluently though. Miranda plays piano, but since she rarely comes home, we keep this room closed." Katie explained. "Apollo kids aren't the only musicals at camp."

"I know," I replied. "I play the piano, and I'm not an Apollo kid."

Not completely.

"You play piano?" Katie exclaimed. I nodded. "Come on, you got to play a song for me!"

"I-I'm not that good," I said as Katie removed the covering and pulled the bench out. "I can't recall any piece in its entirety."

"Silly, we have some piano books here." she pointed out. "Play a song from one of those."

Seeing how eager she was, I sighed and gave in to her request. "Fine. Just give me a moment to find one I'm familiar with."

Despite how quick I was able to learn a new piece, I still couldn't master the art of sight-reading. I couldn't play any unfamiliar piece until I went through every stanza with careful scrutiny. I flipped through the first book offered, glancing briefly at the titles until I finally came across one that I could play. It was Greensleeves.
I set the book on the stand, loosened the tension in my shoulders before I started to play. The soft, gentle music swept across the room. I felt my eyes close briefly for a few moments. I tried to ignore Katie's presence in the room. I wasn't used to having an audience.

When I finished, Katie started clapping.

"That was amazing!" Katie complimented. "It's so different from hearing my sister play."

"Really?"

Katie nodded, thoughtful. "It just has that *emotional* feel to it. Greensleeves is one of my favorite songs. I play the same piece on my flute." Then, her face lit up. "Hey, I know you aren't going to stay for too long, but I'm doing orchestra tomorrow after school. Can you come with me?"

"Sure," I said easily. "I don't have anything else to do so…"

"Great!" Katie said. "Oh yeah, since you're like a literature whiz on Hamlet, do you mind helping me with the lit homework and maybe calculus too?"

"Only if you help me with biology," I bargained.

"Deal!"

-o-

"Come on, it's this way." Katie said, as she guided me along the hallways of Madison High School. She was carrying her flute case while I helped her carry her music sheets.

It was the end of my third day, and I was joining Katie at orchestra. I was certain that Katie was going to make it since she was in orchestra last year, so was I there just for moral support? I wasn't sure, but whatever Katie's reason was for dragging me here, I was hoping to find more clues as to why this school was on Athena's list for investigation. If it wasn't one of the core classes, maybe the answer lied in the after school clubs. I already looked through the athletic teams, and now orchestra was next.

We walked through the door, and my eyes noticed a grand stage. There were students and staff seated in the auditorium. Some of the kids were setting up violins, trumpets, drums, and cellos. I noticed a pretty black-haired woman with spectacles directing the students.

"Set the microphones up front. No, not like that- a bit closer, and yes! That's it!" the woman said. "Perfect. Is everyone ready?"

"Not yet!" Katie called, racing down the steps until she reached the stage platform. I followed her closely. "I still need to set up, Ms. See."

"Ms. Gardner," Ms. See said. "Try to come a bit earlier next time." She noticed me. "Are you here to try out?"

"No, I'm only here for Katie's sake." I explained.

"Do you play an instrument?"

"Only piano, but I don't think that's considered orchestra-!"

"That'll do," Ms. See interrupted. "We were going to have a piano accompaniment, but the pianist called in sick. How good are you?"
"I'm decent?" I said hesitantly.

"He's good, Ms. See," Katie answered. I shot her a mock-glare. "I heard him play before."

"Wonderful!" Ms. See exclaimed. She started to usher me towards the keyboard. "All you have to do is play the starting stanzas of Bohemian Rhapsody."

Oh shit. That was an unfamiliar piece.

I tried to excuse myself out. "I-I'm sorry Ms. See, but I never played that piece before-!"

"You'll have time to practice while the kids are tuning." Ms. See interrupted, not taking 'no' for an answer. I noticed that she smelled nice, and up close, I noticed how perfect her face was. High cheekbones, big green eyes with a blue tint, plump lips. She had an hour-glass figure, and her black hair swept down her waist with luminous curls.

"I-I suppose," I stuttered. I sucked in a breath as she leaned in.

Whoa, even her eyelashes are perfect.

"Do your best," Ms. See whispered, her greenish-blue eyes unblinking. "I know you can do it."

Suddenly, I felt compelled to please her. I could do it. I knew I could. It's just a combination of notes put together at different rhythms- no problem at all.

I started to play as ordered. The music wasn't perfect, but it could be considered decent. Ms. See only winked at me, causing me to blush, before she directed the other students to start playing. She swayed her body back and forth. I couldn't seem to look away from her. The music played on, and Ms. See continued to gesture her arms with an intoxicating elegance, her eerie eyes I realized, glanced at me after every few seconds.

Ms. See asked to see me after orchestra ended. Katie told me that her dad would be picking us up, and she told me they'd wait for me outside before I left to join Ms. See. It was dark. I noticed there were a lot of used stage props: furniture pieces, boards, rope, even dolls. There was also a foul stench lingering around. It smelled like something was rotting.

"Y-you wanted to speak to me, Ms. See?" I said, my face burning. Ms. See smiled, and what a beautiful smile that was. I felt my eyes drooping, my breathing shallow, and my heart started to beat faster.

Snap out of it! My inner voice said, frantic. I ignored it, too busy listening to what Ms. See was saying.

"You're special, William." Ms. See said, sitting cross-legged on an antique dresser. "Do you know that? You managed to catch my eye so much quicker than the others."

Wake up!

"I did?" I said, doubtful. I was called special by Artemis once, and maybe Percy had said that word to me too? This was different though. Ms. See didn't know I was a clone, and I was being called special…

You're delusional! That voice of mine snapped. I frowned. My inner voice was being an asshole today.

"Something wrong, Will?" Ms. See said, noticing my frown. She got up, her eyes unflinching. "I can call you Will, right? Or do you prefer William?"
"Will's my friend's name." I mumbled.

"You share the same name as him?" Ms. See asked.


"Oh, that's cute," Ms. See said, "this Will must be important to you."

I nodded in reply. Will was important to me. He was one of the few I trusted. He was the first camper I got along with well. He was my family, best friend, and brother-in-arms. Now that Lee was gone, I grew more protective of him, which was why I was initially against Percy's offer of having him go outside the camp boundaries. I made Percy promise me to look out for him in my absence.

"How about I show you something important to me as well?"

"Really?"

"Yes," Ms. See said, guiding me into a darker room. We were further away from the curtains, away from the other students who were still packing up. "I only share what's important to me to those I deem special, and you are one of those special ones."

I hitched a breath as Ms. See placed a hand on my shoulder. The unfamiliar touch caused me to seize up and I involuntarily shook her hand off. The woman appeared offended before she shrugged off the rudeness casually. Meanwhile, the voice in my head continued to scream out incoherent words, causing me to have a migraine. There was a dark mahogany door in front of us.

"It's in here." She opened the door and gestured me to go in. That horrible odor blasted out at full force causing me to stumble back in disgust. The rotting stench was so much that I lost consciousness briefly, and in that one short lapse, I heard my inner voice loud and clear.

**WAKE UP!**

I blinked, and I felt like someone slugged me with a baseball bat. My mind was clear. My senses sharpened, and I was suddenly aware of how isolated we were. I could hear the last student exiting the auditorium. It may be dark, but my night vision allowed me to see everything, including what was beyond that door.

They were corpses. Dismantled, butchered up corpses. I may have seen a lot of death over the years, but none compared to this. If I wasn't so used to masking my thoughts and emotions, I would have keeled over and vomited after seeing something so repulsive.

Behind me, I didn't even need to look to confirm Ms. See's non-human identity. That was the first thing that registered in my mind. I was so engrossed by her attractive disguise that I didn't take in her monstrous scent. I turned my head slowly, my eyes taking in her 3 meter long scaly green tail, sharp fangs, and elongated nails.

"It's been so long since I've engorged on demigods." Ms. See hissed, approaching me from the side. She smelled me. I must have loosened my control over my aura while infatuated. I slowly moved back to keep distance. "They smell so ravishing. So much more appetizing than the usual mortals I feast on." She sniffed strongly, and exhaled in pleasure.

"What… are you?" I said, trying to keep my nerves under control. She was like Echidna, but she had the allure of an empousa. Yet, she lacked the physiology. "You're not a dracaena, and you don't look like an empousa."
"I'm lamiai." Ms. See answered. She encircled me, trying to trap me in. "Descended from the great Lamia, servants of Hecate." She cocked her head in curiosity. "You are aware of your heritage already? With an aura as small as yours and with such a sweet aroma, I believed you ignorant. You must be a son of a minor deity then, pity."

I didn't answer her. Instead, I tried to recall everything I've read about Ms. See's kind. Lamiai were beautiful women that used their looks to attract their victims. They were like empousai, but unlike the former, whose preferences were men, lamiai preferred little children.

"I thought you attacked children at night," I pointed out. "Not teenagers."

"That's in the old days!" She exclaimed. "Children have so little meat on them. I've expanded my diet. You demigods always turn up at these schools. I knew it was only a matter of time before I get to taste one."

My eyes narrowed dangerously. So all those corpses I saw were students of this school? Something's not right: Why were there no reports of missing students? None of the teachers and staff seemed to notice anything amiss. I knew the Mist was powerful, but to this extent?

I decided to test her. "You might kill me, but my parents will find out. The teachers must have noticed something is wrong. The children you ate must be reported missing. You'll be discovered."

Ms. See only laughed at my threat. "You're a brave one, I'll give you that, but no one will find out about this. Lady Hecate has granted me free reign over this school, and with her aid, I will feast to my heart's content!"

"Hecate's on the side of the gods." I argued. Feelings of dread started to emerge. "The gods will never allow you to continue this!"

"You're right," she agreed, "but I answer only to Lady Hecate, and she's no longer loyal to those Olympian tyrants."

So my conjecture was right. Hecate was no longer loyal. My list of deferred deities has now increased by one. First, it was Iris, and then Morpheus, Pomona, Janus, Nike, Melinoe, and finally Hecate. That's a total of seven minor deities that have joined the Titan's cause, and there could be more. There were also the Primordials to consider, the Titans that have yet to be freed, and the demigods of said deities, who could be rallying to join the Titan army out of parental allegiance.

I wished I wasn't burdened with this information. I didn't want to know the extent of our enemies' support. I wished I could still believe we stood a good chance at winning the coming war, but my investigations were slowly proving me wrong.

"I'm going to savor you," Ms. See said, licking her lips in anticipation as she moved closer. I stepped back tentatively, my eyes not once leaving hers. "I rather keep my food fresh. Maybe I'll take one of your arms, and then a kidney. You can still last without those. Or if you beg hard enough, I will devour the vital organs first."

I chuckled at that, unknowingly startling the monster.

"You want me to beg?" I echoed, incredulous. I lowered my gaze as I lifted a hand to take off my glasses and secured them in my back pocket. "I have no desire of being eaten, Ms. See, and I certainly will never beg to the likes of you."

I may not like how our chances appeared on our side, but at the moment, I'll be satisfied in sending this filthy creature to Tartarus. After seeing those mangled corpses, I felt my temper rising up. I
clenched my fists at my sides, feeling that familiar surge of energy before every summoning. I could feel the silver blades flickering at my fingertips. I would avenge those poor teens by annihilating this monster without mercy.

Ms. See's smirk disappeared once I fully uncapped my aura, finally realizing who she was truly messing with. She thought I was weak? I guessed I'd have to show her how wrong she was.

She attacked first, her serpentine tail curling around a wooden stage prop before propelling it towards me rapidly. I sidestepped her attack, summoned my knives, and leaped into the air. I aimed for a downwards strike and Ms. See dodged out of the way while trying to claw me with those talon-sized fingers. I tried to slash her, but she was just too slippery. She always managed to move out of the way and into a safe zone. I'd have to provoke her into attacking me in order for my new-found plan to work.

"Is that all you got?" I taunted. "All that talk and nothing to show! Do you only attack weak mortals, Ms. See? You don't even deserve to be called a monster."

Ms. See snarled. "We'll see about that, insect!"

She gave chase, and I was forced on the defensive as she attacked with both arms and her tail. I twisted and turned to avoid her fatal blows, but got minor cuts in the process. In the middle of our fight, Ms. See licked her blood-stained finger. She widened her eyes with glee.

"Delicious!" she exclaimed, licking the rest of her fingers ravenously. "I've never tasted something so exquisite! I can taste the godly essence so clearly! Not even my past demigod meals were this rich!"

"Gee, I never knew." I mumbled sarcastically. My blood wasn't toxic to her. Lamiai were immune to poison? I learned something new today. So much for Plan A. But no worries- I already had a Plan B, and a Plan C if needed.

I moved out of reach, climbing up a huge pile of old broken-down stage props stacked by a corner, with a drooling lamiai close behind. I climbed as far up as I could, and I noticed the metal railings hanging overhead. I forced myself to look down and saw Ms. See catching up at an alarming rate, motivated to get more out of me. I slammed a foot at her face when her sharp fangs drew too close. She staggered back, and I slashed at her tail, causing her to lose her grip.

While she fell, Ms. See moved her tail to latch herself on one of the metal rails hanging below the ceiling. I grinned, expecting her to do that. Once she had her tail fastened around the metal rail, I had my bow notched, and my silver arrow pierced her tail to the rail permanently. Ms. See screeched, her body flailing like a fish out of water. She struggled to get her arms up, but she didn't have the ability to do so, weakened by my earlier attacks.

I climbed down the makeshift hill of objects and walked towards my trapped victim. I regarded the lamiai thoughtfully. Compared to my fight with Antiphates, this one was easy. Athena couldn't have sent me here just to discover Hecate's treachery. There must be more.

"Tell me what you know of the Titans' plans." I ordered. Ms. See only narrowed her eyes viciously and moved to claw my face before a couple slashes from me silenced her onslaught. When I was certain she won't be attacking me, I asked again. "Tell me what you know…or I'll make you enter Tartarus the hard way."

Ms. See only smiled, her eyes staring unblinkingly at me. "You won't hurt a beautiful lady like me."

I felt her compulsion trying to inch its way in, but this time, I was prepared. I strengthened my mental
barriers, and in response, I angrily slashed a diagonal cut across her eyes, blinding her. The lamiai screamed, her hands moving to touch her bloodied face.

"Try that again and I'll slash somewhere else," I said vehemently.

"Hecate will destroy you!" Ms. See screamed in anguish. "She will make you pay for this!"

"I doubt it. Tell me, where is your precious Lady now?" I mocked. "I don't sense her anywhere. Oh, right. It's because a goddess like her isn't likely to pay any attention to low-grade scum like you." I noticed Ms. See started to shiver in fear.

"I-I don't know anything!" she cried.

"I don't believe that," I said. "You must know something vital for the gods to send me here to deal with you."

"I really don't know anything!" she insisted. "I'm alone here! I'm hardly in contact with the Titans!"

"How about any piece of news you heard? Any rumors and gossip of their movements?" I pressed.

"There's nothing!"

"Really?" She nodded vigorously. I sighed dramatically, and clashed my knives together, making loud sharpening noises. I noticed Ms. See started to tremble violently. "I was going to let you off easy if you gave me useful information, but I guess you don't deserve that sympathy. What were you saying before? That you take an arm or a kidney from me? I think that's a wonderful suggestion."

Ms. See paled.

"B-but I really don't…" I clashed my knives again, ready to make sushi out of her until she blurted, "Wait! Wait! I-I think I do know something!"

"You know something?" I said doubtfully.

"I heard they had a base at Mount Othrys. T-they have a fleet there. Ships full of monsters," Ms. See said. "I-I think they plan on attacking once their numbers are high enough."

"Mount Othrys…but that's in California." I pondered, lowering my weapons. "Where do they plan to attack?"

"I-I'm not sure-!" The tip of my knife touched her neck. Ms. See shrieked, "San Francisco! T-they plan on attacking San Francisco! I don't know which part but it's somewhere there!"

San Francisco. That was where Annabeth's family resided, but why would they attack there? Camp Half-Blood was their main enemy, and they were located on the other side of the country. Unless…

"Are you lying to me?" I tested. During my past encounters, I realized that my built in lie detector wasn't a hundred percent accurate. In order to heighten that accuracy, I would have to create extreme conditions to increase the chances of unveiling the truth. "If I find out this information is fake, I will do everything in my power to track down and kill you every time you return from Tartarus. That's a promise."

Ms. See shook her head, sobbing. "I-I'm not! I'm not lying! Release me!"

"Very well," I said, satisfied. I slashed her throat swiftly. While the lamiai dissolved, I found an old cloth and wiped stains off my silver knives (out of habit rather than necessity) before allowing them
to vanish.

"San Francisco." I murmured, walking back out. I recalled Katie telling me that she and her dad were waiting to pick me up. "That must be where they are."

-o-
"Is everything ready?" Lynetta asked while shoving my things into the trunk of her car. I placed another bag in before I nodded.

"It's everything." I said. After killing Ms. See and forcing all the information out of her, I contacted Walt immediately once I returned to my room in Katie's home. Lynetta showed up the next morning. It was a weekend, so Katie and her father were by the door, watching us depart.

"Do you really have to leave so soon?" Katie had asked me earlier that day. "My dad and I don't mind if you stay longer."

I smiled. "Sorry Katie, but I have other matters I have to tend to. I don't have time to waste. Besides, I already prepared lunch and dinner for you guys to eat tomorrow."

Katie gave a scowl. "It's not because of the food!" I raised an eyebrow, and she blushed. "Fine, it's one of the reasons. Are you sure you can't tell me where you're staying? Not even a hint?"

I only shook my head. Katie decided to help me pack up.

"Did you watch the news, Seth?" Katie asked. "There were a lot of police cars at our school today. My dad and I were going grocery shopping when we noticed the police cars at Madison."

_They must have noticed the missing students_, I thought. _Once Ms. See was destroyed, the Mist no longer served any purpose. If that's the case, the parents have finally realized what happened and asked the police to investigate._

"You have any idea what happened?" Katie asked. I thought about it briefly, and shrugged.

"I have some ideas." I said, elusive. "I hope the police clear up whatever they need to do. Otherwise, you might end up going to that all-girls school."

Katie narrowed her eyes. "You did something, didn't you? I heard the police have been there since orchestra ended yesterday."

"I might have been its catalyst," I said. "It's nothing to be concerned about. Trust me. Now, are you going to help me pack or continue your interrogation?" Katie gave a huff, and reluctantly continued packing.

"Are you Katie Gardner?" Lynetta asked, breaking my chain of thought. Katie nodded, confused on how she knew her. "Seth mentioned you on the phone."

"Who are you?" Katie questioned. "Why is Seth staying with you?"

"I'm Lynetta Lin, daughter of Athena," she answered. "Seth is my charge, and he is being well cared for." Katie didn't look convinced. She turned to Mr. Gardner. "Thank you for allowing Seth to enjoy your hospitality."

"I should be the one thanking him for all those good meals," Mr. Gardner said, giving me an amused look. "Any friend of my daughter's is welcome."
"Thank you, sir." I said, dipping my head slightly.

Lynetta started the car. Katie moved to give me one last hug, and I let her. She also whispered some departing words for me to tell her sister, Miranda- if I ever saw her before she did. I told her I would pass on her parting words if I was able. We waved good-bye, and the car grew silent as we pulled out of Katie's neighborhood.

"So I heard you faced a lamiai?" Lynetta started.

"Yes," I answered. "Apparently, Hecate has switched sides. I also learned something interesting."

"Oh?"

"The monster said there was a fleet of monsters on the other side of the country," I said, scrutinizing her reaction. I already had an idea why the fleet was there. "She claimed they had a base at Mount Othrys, and they planned on attacking some place in San Francisco."

After hearing San Francisco, I noticed how Lynetta narrowed her eyes briefly before recovering again. "San Francisco. That's…peculiar."

"Isn't it?" I pressed. "Why would they attack there…when Camp Half-Blood and Olympus are nowhere near that location? The underworld is in LA, and it will be suicide for them to infiltrate that place."

"I'm sure they have their reasons," she said, not looking at me. She suddenly found the road very interesting to look at. "Mr. Forger will like to hear this."

I grew frustrated. "Lynetta, you can drop the act. I know the Roman Camp is in San Francisco."

"I'm sure you do," she said tersely. "I'm glad you found out on your own, but I am forbidden to discuss any of this with you."

"Why?" I asked. "You know and I know. There's no point in hiding it anymore."

"I'm Greek," Lynetta said. "I'm not half-Roman like you are, I cannot discuss this any longer. If you wish to know more, only Mr. Forger will be able to tell you."

"But surely…!"

Lynetta interrupted, "please, Seth. Just drop it."

I kept my mouth closed, and let the conversation die out. Lynetta appeared nervous, even scared. She grasped the steering wheel tightly, her hands turning paler. Her face remained stern, but after spending so much time with her, I could tell how troubled she was despite her neutral countenance. Seeing her like this made me wonder how far the gods would go to make sure both camps remained ignorant of the other.

We arrived a bit later than usual due to the traffic on the road. When we finally pulled at Walt's place, I immediately set down my things upstairs in my room. I was going to go to Walt's workroom to give my standard report when I sensed a familiar godly presence. My eyes narrowed as I concentrated, and a moment later, I was able to identify it. I knocked once on the door to let Walt know I was outside. After hearing an affirmative, I walked in.

I saw Walt seated behind his desk. Lynetta stood beside him, and her mother sat on a chair opposite them. When Walt and Lynetta saw me enter, the two of them quietly went out of the room to give us
privacy. She regarded me thoughtfully.

"Seth Hunter," Athena said. "My daughter just finished informing me of your success."

I only nodded, feeling uneasy with those piercing grey eyes fixed on me. Athena was a blank slate. It's hard to tell what she was thinking, and her advice, if she bothered to give any, was obscure and impossible to crack without reading between the lines. If our positions weren't so vast, I imagined it would be nice to talk to Athena over coffee or something similar to that. Her ideas and thoughts would no doubt be…intriguing. I could learn a thing or two from having a chat with her. I guessed that's what you called a wisdom goddess.

Athena only smiled at my silence. "You completed the tasks I assigned you all in due time. You have my personal thanks."

Again, I didn't say a word. What could I say? I couldn't say it was nothing without expecting Athena to drop more stuff on me- which I didn't want. Athena watched me carefully, expecting me to say something. I didn't want to risk offending her with my silence, so I muttered a concise reply.

"I appreciate seeing you here," I murmured carefully. "I'm guessing…you may have other matters to attend to?"

"Of course," she answered. "Such is the life of an immortal. Even with the unlimited time we have, there are always things to attend to, something that draws our attention. We can never seem to complete the goals and tasks we set out to do at our desired pace." She stood up, before addressing me again. "I know you value your time, Seth. These missions can be exhausting, but you must have gained something out of it, correct?"

"Yes," I whispered. "I believe I have."

Athena replied, "do you remember what I said I will do if you finished my assignment?"

I hesitated, thinking. "I think you said you will…reward me?"

"Yes, I did say that," Athena said. "I acknowledge your effort and ingenuity in carrying out my task, and for that, I believe a small reward is in order: you helped the gods obtain vital information, so I believe it fair to give you information of my own."

"What kind of information are we talking about?" I said suspiciously. After all the monsters I faced and all the places I had to infiltrate, having information as my reward seemed petty.

"First, I must confirm one thing." Athena said. I tensed up as the goddess walked closer to me, standing just a foot away. "What do you know of the Romans?"

"I know there's a camp, and it's somewhere in San Francisco," I said. I knew this was a touchy subject. With the way Lynetta was acting earlier, I knew I was treading on thin ice. "I know that I am half-Roman, and I know that you and the rest of the Olympians have been keeping the Greeks and Romans apart for centuries."

"That's correct," she said. "Your Roman heritage, however, is news to me. I once inquired of your mother about your creation, Seth. She told me she transformed into her true form and inserted pure signature into you. Do you know what that means?"

"I know she transformed into her divine form while she made me, and by doing so, I was more than just a demigod." I said. "That is all."
"Yes, and we all assumed she was in her Greek form when she made you," Athena said narrowly. "I see now that our assumption is wrong. Be glad you are an heir, Seth. If you were her son, a child of Rome and Greece, we would never have allowed you to live. No matter what your mother and uncle may say about it."

I involuntarily shivered. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a warning," Athena said, "one I strongly advise you to follow. You are in a unique and unorthodox position, Seth Hunter. There was never a mortal or demigod with Greek and Roman origins that lived as long as you have. Despite what you may be to Artemis, if you utter a word about the Romans to anyone who isn't aware already…" She trailed off, allowing me to imagine the outcome.

"You want me to keep my mouth shut?" I said, a bit shaky.

Athena nodded. "For the time being. Now, before we went on this tangent, I was asking if you knew what it meant to have a pure signature."

"I know I'm not a demigod," I replied, crossing my arms to mask my unease. "Maybe you have some ideas as to what else I can be called? I don't want to be classified a clone for the rest of my life."

"I might," Athena said, "but I can't be too sure. I need to watch your progress further to ascertain it."

I rolled my eyes at her elusiveness. "Why can't you tell me now?"

"I don't wish to give out false information," she said. "Be patient. I'm sure I'll come to an answer soon. You won't remain an anomaly for long."

"Great," I muttered. It's frustrating how I couldn't identify what I was like everyone else. I hate being called a clone, a copy, or as Kronos once told me, a doppelganger. At least I wasn't a girl. I didn't want to imagine how different my circumstances would be if I was.

"My curiosity is satisfied," she said. "I will proceed to tell you the information you desire to know, Seth. Be sure to listen carefully, for I won't repeat it again." I nodded, attentive. "I know of your future plans- don't worry, Seth. My daughter and Forger didn't tell me. I am the goddess of strategy and battle after all, and knowing this, I'm sure you would like to know where the initiates meet."

I swallowed, taken aback. That was useful information, the kind I didn't even bother to look into. I didn't even realize I needed it until Athena mentioned it to me.

"Louisville, Kentucky," she said. "That is the place where all the new supporters go to prove their worth. I am not permitted to say more, but I'm sure your tracking skills will be enough for you to narrow it down."

"I see," I said, filing the info to memory. I wouldn't forget this. "What do you mean by, 'prove their worth'? Is there a test involved?"

"Of course," Athena said. "From what I've seen, the stronger ones are ranked the highest, with the weaker demigods as disposable foot soldiers. Be sure to prepare yourself, Seth Hunter. If you hope to succeed in your job, you must come out on top."

"I won't accept anything less," I said firmly.

The goddess smiled. "Before I conclude my visit, there is one other thing that I'm sure is of interest to you, as a token of thanks from me."
"What is it?" I asked.

Athena narrowed her eyes, her stare frightening me. "Beware of Aphrodite."

I felt my body froze up, my heart almost stopped. "W-what...?"

"I know what happened to your surrogate family." Athena said sternly. "In fact, there is little that I do not know already. I'm telling you this as a favor in order to even out your playing field. Do not underestimate her. Aphrodite may not be the strongest goddess around, but she is far from stupid. Remember Seth, Aphrodite isn't an Olympian for her looks."

I was stunned, unable to utter a single word as Athena walked past me and out the door. I felt her aura disappear a moment later. When I was sure she was gone, I felt my knees give out, and my hands were on the ground to steady myself. My rapid heartbeat rang loudly, and a place a hand over it to calm it.

In order to even out your playing field...I heard her words again. Athena didn't say it outright, but I knew what she meant. To even out...she told me this so I could up my chances. That meant I didn't have a chance before, that I was the one at a disadvantage, and why would that be?

Aphrodite isn't an Olympian for her looks.

"Aphrodite...knows that I know," I muttered aloud, to make this claim more believable to me. That was the only advantage I had, and Athena indirectly said I no longer had it. If she decided to tell me this personally, there must be some truth to it. Athena didn't gain anything from lying to me. I knew I wasn't on the top of her favorites list, but I did complete her assignment, and she seemed satisfied with the results. I would have to take her word for it.

If Athena was telling the truth, how on earth did Aphrodite figure it out? I hadn't spoken to her since that visit to Olympus, and our encounter was short. Did I give something away without knowing it?

I felt the edges of my mouth widen. Aphrodite was proving to be quite the challenge. My element of surprise was gone, and according to Athena, that barely lasted anyway. I stood back up, pacing around the room to think. My hands were clenched to my sides, before I ran a hand through my auburn hair out of habit.

I need to study, I thought. I have to look into Aphrodite some more. Look up her history. Find out the extent of her abilities, her allies, and any of her godly children. If I encounter any of her demigod children, I'll force them to give me all the information they can about her.

The first step to any plan was to know what you were up against. Know your enemy. It was a tactic I used with Artemis, and that information came in handy when exchanging verbal blows against her, and I even got Bianca to decline her offer (which I regretted now). There's got to be something in the texts to help me out, and I was going to find them no matter how long it took.

-o-

After that encounter with Athena, the following days were peaceful. I stayed in Walt's home training as usual, and Lynetta would provide me the occasional spar. During one of those spars in the arena, my mind was uneasy. I knew that my training here was soon coming to an end, Lynetta had told me that herself. At the latest, I will be done in two months. Then, I would be visiting Louisville. That thought made me sick with anxiety. Worse, I wouldn't be able to fulfill my promise to Lucy, who welcomed me to see her during the late holidays.

With a fogged up mind like mine, it wasn't surprising that Lynetta managed to end our spar more
quickly than usual. As I got better in swordsmanship, our spars extended longer and longer, but this
time, I was fighting her half-heartedly. She noticed something amiss.

"What's wrong, Seth?" she asked.

"I keep thinking about what happens after," I told her after dissolving the two silver swords I had in
my hands. "You and Walt have been helping me improve, and it's showing, but I don't know if it
will be enough."

Lynetta frowned, and said quietly, "did my mother play a role in this?"

"Sort of," I admitted, "I appreciate the advice she's given me. I just wish I can take the easy way out
sometimes, you know? I still can't comprehend the fact that I will be joining the Titans soon."

"I understand the feeling," she said, "but I'm sure you are more than ready for this, Seth. You've
grown since the day I first met you, and there's a reason for that. It's all due to your own
perseverance. My mom once told me that our efforts are what guarantee a person's strength. It's the
path to acquiring that strength that matters the most."

"Well, strong or not, it doesn't make me any braver."

"It's okay to feel fear," she said. She stepped out of the ring and placed her sword onto the rack. I
followed her. "I will be scared too if I was in your position, but fear is what makes us prepared."
When I didn't answer her immediately, still thinking about it, Lynetta gave a smile of encouragement.
"You need to stop stressing yourself. There are demigods out there with less training, but still
manage to succeed. What does that say about you?"

"Thanks, Lynetta," I said. "I needed that."

She nodded. "Is there anything else that bothers you?"

I hesitated. "Lucy."

"The mortal girl?" Lynetta said, narrowing her eyes. "What about her?"

"I know where I'm going after this," I said. "It's in Camp Half Blood's best interest that I join as soon
as I'm able to, but I cannot predict what will happen to me while I'm there." I sighed, my chest
suddenly felt clogged. "Look, I know I'm being a little paranoid, but what I'm trying to say is…"

"You wish to say good-bye," she stated, her eyes knowing.

I nodded silently, feeling shy and insecure all of a sudden. It's hard for me to talk about Lucy to other
people. Lucy was connected to me on a personal level, and by revealing her, it was like I was
exposing my own vulnerabilities, and I hated it.

"It can be arranged," she said after a moment. I was stunned by her easy compliance. "You have
their contact number, and don't worry about Mr. Forger. He will let you visit, I'm sure of it."

"Why are you doing this?" I said, confused. "Shouldn't it be in your interest for me to stay? I will
complete my training faster."

Lynetta's features softened. "It's because we understand your sentiments. I know what it's like to lose
someone close to me, you know that. Mr. Forger does too."

"Walt?" I said. "Do you mean his past students?"
"Yes," she said, "and also his younger brother."

"I didn't know," I muttered. "Was he a Roman demigod too?"

"It's not my story to tell," Lynetta replied. "Maybe you can get Mr. Forger to share it with you someday."

We went back upstairs. I took a quick shower, studied a bit, and then went to the kitchen and grabbed the spare phone. I stared at the dial pad for a while, contemplating what I should say.

**Hey, it's Seth. How are you doing? Oh, I'm fine thanks. I'm just calling to...you know, ask if I can come over?** I shook my head. That sounded so, so awkward. I thought up some more phrases, but every line was almost forced. A moment later, I decided to wing it.

I waited anxiously as I heard the phone ring, and then I heard the receiver.

"**Hello?**"

"**Lucy?**" I said in surprise. I was expecting one of her parents to pick up. I later recalled that it was Saturday, and Lucy had no school.

Lucy sounded startled before she exclaimed, "**Seth? Hey! How are you? You've never called before.**"

"I'm fine, Lucy." I said, relaxing. "Is your mom or dad home?"

"**Dad's at work, and my mom's at the kitchen making a cherry pie,**" she told me. "**Do you want to talk to her?**"

"Yeah, um, Lucy...are you free right now?" I asked, clenching my free hand.

"**Well, I just finished my homework. I guess I'm free. Why?**"

"Something came up," I started. "I...I might not be able to see you this Thanksgiving...or Christmas like we planned." Lucy grew quiet, and her silence scared me more than a pack of hellhounds.

"**Lucy? Did you hear me? Lucy...?**"

"**I heard you,**" she whispered, "**b-but why, Seth? This never happened before! You always visit on the holidays. You promised me you would.**"

"**I-I know I did, Lucy,**" I said, wincing. "That's why I'm calling. I'm wondering if I could visit you and your parents this month. You know, to make it up to you?"

"**Oh.**" Lucy said, surprised, and then she started to get excited. "**Yes, yes you can! You can come anytime during the weekends!**" I smiled at her enthusiasm.

"I'm glad you want me to visit, but I have to have your parents' permission first, remember?" I reminded her.

A second later, I heard Lucy making thumping noises as she ran (probably to her mom). I heard her say some words before replying back to me, "**My mom says you come by next Saturday. It's Fun Fall Harvest next week. We're going to a carnival! She says you can come with us.**"

"A carnival?" I echoed. "I've never been to one. Is it a lot of fun?"

"**Uh huh, we get to play a lot of games and go on these really scary, fast rides. We were going to...**"
stay half of the time since mom has her baby to worry about, but she says if you come, we can stay longer.” Lucy explained. "So will you come? Please?"

I smiled. "Of course, Lucy. Say thank you to your mom for me, okay?"

"I will! See you soon, Seth!" Lucy said.

"I'll see you soon, and take care…Lucy."

"Good bye!"

-0-

A week later, I was sitting in the back seat with Lucy in the Morrison's dark green van. We were going to the Fun Fall Harvest Carnival that was taking place in Ringwood, New Jersey. Lucy could barely contain her excitement. I listened to her as she went on about what rides she wanted to go on and what food she wanted to eat. Mrs. Morrison was seated beside her husband in the front, her belly had at least doubled in size last time I saw her.

"…And we must go on the Ferris wheel!" Lucy said happily, showing me the carnival brochure. "We should probably go on that one if we decide to take a break from walking around."

"Whatever you say, Lucy," I said, "I'm happy with anything." Then, I turned to Mrs. Morrison. There were some questions I'd wanted to ask. "How's the baby coming along? Have you both decided on some names?"

"We thought of a couple," she said. "We still don't know if we will be having a son or daughter yet, but I am leaning towards Robert if it's a boy, and Valera or Emma for a girl."

"I thought we wanted Ian for the boy," Mr. Morrison said. "Robert is a too common name. I think Ian sounds better too."

"I don't remember making that agreement."

"Look!" Lucy exclaimed, pointing at the window. "We're here!"

I looked at where she was pointing, and I saw the tops of many stands and the Ferris wheel sticking out behind a wooden fence. There were many cars looking for available parking spaces, and the noise here was deafening. I can hear so many people inside, playing the games, screaming at the tops of carnival rides like the Tilt-A-Whirl. My nose can pick up the smell of popcorn, cotton candy, and other carnival goodies. Mr. Morrison eventually found an available parking spot near the back.

"Wow," I said, getting off the van. "This place is amazing. Thank you for inviting me."

Mrs. Morrison smiled. "You're practically family, Seth. I like to see you have fun more often."

"Lucy, make sure you stay with Seth at all times," Mr. Morrison instructed. "You are not allowed to wander off on your own."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "I will, dad."

"Seth, I'm counting on you to keep her in your sight when my wife and I can't."

"I will, Mr. Morrison," I answered.

After Mr. Morrison paid for the tickets, the fun began. There were so many rides I've never even
heard about, and there were also many of those prize booths. For our first ride, Lucy wanted to go on
the Flying Swings, and then the Twister, and then a small Roller Coaster. We also went on some
water rides, and my jacket and shirt were now drenched from Lucy and Mr. Morrison's water gun
attack. I got them back, of course. Mrs. Morrison, since she was caring for two, didn't participate too
much. She mostly watched on the side, taking pictures with her digital camera.

Later, I had my first taste of funnel cake.

"This is good!" I said, munching on the sweet dessert. Mrs. Morrison and I were seated at one of the
white picnic tables. "This stuff tastes as good as whip cream!"

"You never had funnel cake before?" Mrs. Morrison asked. I shook my head. "Then be sure to have
plenty! My husband is buying some more with Lucy."

I nodded graciously. I never thought I would get the chance to go to a carnival as vast as this one.
Carnival food really was something else. I already had a cheese burger, fries, and strawberry
milkshake (with extra whip cream), and now I was downing my plate of funnel cake. Lucy and her
father came back afterwards. Lucy had a bowl of Dip and Dots, and Mrs. Morrison also had a huge
plate of food before her.

Our next ride was called Splash Dunk—a huge water slide so high up that it was impossible to not
get wet, unless you happened to be a child of Poseidon. There was a height requirement of five feet,
and Lucy barely cut it, but we still got in. Again, Mrs. Morrison decided to sit out on this one.

I heard a loud growl, and I noticed Mrs. Morrison clutching her stomach tightly. "Are you alright,
Mrs. Morrison?"

"I need the restroom again," she muttered, sighing. "It looks like half of my time spent here is behind
a bathroom stall. I suppose this is what it means to be caring for two."

"I'll come with you," Mr. Morrison said. He stopped us when Lucy and I followed. "You two stay
here. There will be more people coming. You can save me a spot in line."

"Okay, Mr. Morrison," I relented.

He nodded. "Stay with Seth, Lucy. If you guys do get on the ride before we come back, make sure
to call me so we know where you two are."

"Alright, dad," she said with her hand clenching mine.

"Don't worry, sir. I'll take care of her. I promise."

He nodded once more before he guided his wife to the restrooms located at the far end of the street.

After standing in line for a half hour, it was finally our turn. The Morrisons still haven't turned up, so
we went on the water slide without them. It was fun while it lasted. When the raft went down, I was
screaming in delight as the whole raft became engulfed by a huge surge of water. My clothes clung
tightly to my skin, and Lucy's hair was completely soaked and messed up. I was trying to squeeze
the water out of my jacket and shirt as we got off the ride.

"Seth!" Lucy cried. "Look how big that Pegasus is!"

I looked at where she was pointing, and saw one of those pegasi you would see on My Little Pony.
Don't ask me how I knew that, but the yellow Pegasus was hung up on the edge with other three foot
tall stuffed animals. It was likely the game booth's grand prizes. We walked up to it.
"Hey there, do you want to play?" a man asked. I noticed a row of cardboard animals and rifles were lined up. It was a shooting game—my kind of sport. "A dollar a minute."

"How do you play?" I asked.

He pointed at the many cardboard pictures. "Imagine you are a hunter: your job is to shoot down as many deer and other wild animals as you can as they pop up from the bushes. Some animals are worth more points than others. You shoot any pedestrians, minus one point."

"Okay, how many points for the yellow Pegasus?"

"One hundred points," the man said. "You want to give it a try?"

I looked at Lucy. "Do you want to play?" She nodded. I reached into my pocket and took out three dollars and handed it to him. "I'll let her go first."

"Step right up, young miss," the man said, helping Lucy position her rifle. "Remember: Animals good, humans bad." He turned the game up, and there was a digital score set at zero. "Start!"

Lucy started shooting. Some of the foam darts managed to hit the moving animals. I saw her hit a deer (ten points), a raccoon (5 points), and a rabbit (three points). She accidentally hit a pair of pedestrians though—minus two points. The three minutes went by quickly, and Lucy ended up with 37 points. It wasn't a bad score, Lucy still got a small prize for going past 25, but I could tell she was disappointed.

"This game is hard," she said. She held up her prize, a miniature key chain with a bear locket. "But I'm glad I got something." I smiled.

"Don't worry, Lucy. I'll get you that Pegasus." I promised, and I handed the man two dollars. "A hundred points right?"

"That's right," he said. "You sure you only want two minutes?"

I nodded, taking the rifle. Now that I had an idea how this game worked, a hundred points should be no problem. "I'm ready."

I started as soon as the scoreboard showed up. A raccoon popped up, and then a squirrel, and then a deer. I made sure not to hit any pedestrians. I kept shooting, managing to hit every animal that popped up at least twice. I didn't know how much time I had left, or what my score was, until the game ended two minutes later.

"A-a hundred and thirty two points?!" the man exclaimed. He held a hand to his forehead, a look of wonder stretched across his features. He gazed at me in amazement. "Kid, where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"I had a good teacher," I said, thinking of Lynetta. "So…the yellow Pegasus?"

Moments later, Lucy was squealing with glee as she clung onto her new favorite toy tightly. We eventually met up with Mr. and Mrs. Morrison, who were surprised by the new yellow Pegasus until Lucy explained how I won it for her.

The sky was now a blend of oranges, yellows, and reds as we slowly made our way to the entrance. Lucy spotted another game booth she was interested in and the Morrisons went with her as I lingered behind them, watching. While Mr. Morrison paid the game booth manager cash, I suddenly heard a piercing snap!
I felt my heart clench tightly, forcing me to place a hand over it. I heard the snapping sound again, and the sound seemed to echo more loudly. I swerved wildly to locate the noise. People walked past me, no one appeared bothered by the noise I kept hearing. The snap resounded a third time, causing me to clench my teeth. Why was I so bothered by this noise?

Finally, I noticed another booth at my far right. There were three ladies wearing white cloaks cutting yarn. Their faces were obscured by their drawn hoods, but there were wisps of silver hair shown. Their table was filled with those braided necklaces with beads and plastic jewels. One spun the string, another measured out the length, and the last one brought out a pair of golden scissors. The third cut the string a fourth time, creating that familiar snap! I narrowed my eyes, cautious, before stalking up to that booth.

The three ladies noticed me approach. One of them cackled, "look, sisters. The deathless one approaches."

"Yes," another agreed. "No string of his own...how odd."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, realizing who these ladies were. Despite knowing their identity, I continued to press them for answers. "What is this about me having no string?"

The third lady's pale milk white eyes stared at me unblinkingly, causing me to cringe. "Death favors you, Seth Hunter. You will be his harbinger, his dutiful messenger."

"...And carry out his message, you will!" another said in glee. The three ladies simultaneously laughed at their sick joke. It wasn't funny to me.

My skin turned icy cold, my breathing became uneven. One of the lines of my prophecy came to mind. "W-what do you mean? Why does Death favor me?"

"Why wouldn't he favor you?" The one holding the string replied, giving a toothless grin. I tried not to appear intimidated. "He is intrigued by your existence, for he holds no power over you."

I grew frustrated by their obscurity. For every question they answered, more questions turned up. They were even worse than Athena.

"Seth, we are about to leave. What are you doing over there?" I heard Mrs. Morrison call from behind me. I turned to answer her. Lucy was beside her, looking confused.

"I'm just talking to some ladies, Mrs. Morrison," I answered. "Please give me a minute."

Mrs. Morrison started to look worried. "Ladies? There's no one there."

"No one? Of course...there...is..." When I turned around to face them, the three old ladies were gone. I was standing beside an empty booth. There was dust coating the bare table, and there was even a musty odor that smelled like old worn shoes. There were no traces of anyone ever occupying this space. The ladies had vanished...like ghosts.

To say I was spooked out would be an understatement.

"Are you alright, Seth?" Lucy asked, walking up to me. I tried to appear reassuring, but I couldn't tell if I succeeded.

"I'm fine, Lucy." I said uneasily. "Let's go home."
So what do you guys think of Seth's encounter with the three Fates? Any guesses to what they mean? Please leave any overall thoughts and questions in your review. It won't be long before Seth finally joins the Titans. Thank you all for reading!
Abduction

When we arrived at Lucy's home, Mr. Morrison took his wife upstairs to rest while Lucy and I spent more quality time together. The yellow Pegasus found its new home on Lucy's bed. Pebbles greeted me as soon as I walked through the door, and the dog has yet to leave my arms. Mr. Morrison decided to order pizza and Lucy also told me how she was doing at school. She also took me to see the baby's room.

The room was still in progress. There was a white crib in the middle. There were toys, still wrapped, and I noticed the closet doors in front of me were partially open, revealing some clothes hanging. The side window had fancy curtains instead of blinds, and I noticed uncut cartoon pictures scattered on the wooden floor.

"I cut most of those pictures out," Lucy said, noticing my stare. She went to a spare drawer and pulled out the finished pieces. She handed a couple for me to look at. They were characters from Disney and *Cars*. "We plan on sticking them on the walls."

"You cut these out?" I said. The edges were trimmed perfectly. "You're really good, Lucy."

"I like art," she told me. "I really like drawing cartoons, and making origami. My mom also plans to get me started on piano lessons. We're going to have a new piano shipped in next week."

"Really?" I said. "You want to be a pianist too? Wow."

"I wanted to give it a try," she said. "You and a lot of my school friends play piano or violin. I always wanted to play an instrument. I heard it takes a lot of practice though."

"That's true. Maybe during my next visit, you can play a song for me." I suggested. Lucy's face brightened.

"I'll try," she said, "but only if you play a song for me afterwards."

I nodded. "It's a deal."

Later, Lucy helped me set up in their guest room. I was going to spend a night here before departing tomorrow afternoon. Lucy had on her purple flowery pajamas, and Pebbles was settled in his own bed by the corner. I had finished taking a shower, my hair still partially wet when Lucy asked me to read her a story.

"What story do you want me to read?" I asked her, my eyes scanning her bookshelf. There were some challenging books here, and I doubted Lucy read any of those. They must belong to her parents.

"Dad always picks a book from there," Lucy said, "I always ask dad to read one of the difficult books. That way, when he reads it, he can also explain it to me. I always like his explanations. It makes the stories more fun."

"You want me to read you a difficult story?" She nodded.

"Alright," I said. I looked through her choices before my dyslexic eyes recognized a particular
favorite of mine, "How about Frankenstein by Mary Shelley?"

Lucy made a face. "M-maybe not that one. I heard that story is scary, and it's about an ugly monster."

"It's really not that scary," I reassured her, taking the book off the shelf. "The media portrayed it wrong. The monster is just…misunderstood."

Lucy was confused. "Frankenstein is misunderstood?"

"No Lucy," I corrected, "I said the monster is misunderstood. Frankenstein is the name of the doctor that created him."

"Oh." Lucy muttered, surprised. "What is the monster's name?"

"There isn't one," I told her. "The doctor never named him."

"Why?" she said, growing curious. I only smiled and scooted in next to her.

"Do you want me to read the story?" I asked. Lucy looked skeptical. "If it gets too scary for you, make sure you tell me, and I'll stop. What do you say?" She gave a timid nod.

With her permission, I began to read Frankenstein aloud. The story began with the introduction of Victor Frankenstein, and how in the midst of his educational career, he decided to create a being that surpassed death.

"Why would he do that?" Lucy asked, giving a grimace. "It's not like it's his homework, and with dead body parts? That's gross." She made gagging gestures.

I shrugged. "He's an idiot with a god-complex."

"What's a god-complex?"

"It means he is an arrogant, prideful prick. He doesn't think he's god, but he acts like he is one. By making this monster, he believes he will get attention and be famous or something."

"Oh."

I continued reading, with Lucy's head reclined on my shoulder. Her brown eyes tried to follow what I was reading, but they soon grew drowsy, and Lucy laid back on her bed while I continued to read. Eventually, when I got to the part where Victor ran out of the room in terror after his monster drew breath, Lucy muttered an 'oh, so that's why' before closing her eyes and fell asleep.

I closed the book softly, and then I leaned down and I gave a quick kiss on Lucy's forehead.

"Sweet dreams," I murmured. I shut the lights and the room became dark.

-o-

It was afternoon when Lucy and I decided to take a stroll around the Westwood neighborhood.

The weather was sunny, but cold. The two of us were dressed in big coats, and Lucy had on gloves. There were a couple children playing in the local park, and there were a couple of pedestrians going out for a jog. Lucy and I sat down on one of the park benches. The leaves were starting to change color, and an orange leaf landed on my lap, before the wind blew it away.
I saw a couple kids getting on the swings, and there was a pair that went on the slides. One girl was climbing the monkey bars. The parents were talking to each other quietly while watching their kids on the sidelines. I suddenly recalled Ms. Lewinsky taking us to a public park a couple times. It was small, kind of like this one, located very close to the orphanage. I always loved going on the jungle gym and climbing wall.

"Do you want to go play? I can watch you." Lucy shook her head.

"It's too cold," she grumbled. "I rather talk to you."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Why can't you come by on Christmas?" she said quietly. I felt my shoulders slacken. I was really hoping Lucy wouldn't bring this up.

"About that…" I started awkwardly, "Lucy, you remember that thing I told you about? The job I had to do?" She nodded. "Basically, my work is about to start. I can't delay it any longer."

"You never told me what your job was either," she pointed out. "What kind of job won't allow you to visit me? Dad says his work allows vacations and sick leaves."

"Good for him," I said slowly, "but my job doesn't have those benefits."

"Why?" Lucy whispered, her eyes narrowed as she glanced my way. "Why does it have to be you? Is it because of money? Do you need something from that job…?"

"It's not because I need it," I explained, "and it's not because of money-!"

"Then why?" she interrupted, her voice sounding desperate. "There's got to be someone else who can do this job instead!"

"I don't have a choice," I forced out. "I wish I do, Lucy, I honestly do. But I don't." She lowered her gaze, and remained silent. She had her hands clenched into fists on her lap, like she was trying to restrain herself.

"What brought this up, Lucy?" I said softly, placing a tentative hand on her shoulder. "Why are you suddenly asking me these questions?"

"Seth," she began. I could feel her body shaking. "You do know…that I know about your world? I can tell this job you're taking has something to do with that world of yours."

I stiffened, once again reminded of Lucy's uncanny sharpness. I always knew that Lucy had knowledge of Greek mythology running rampant in America. She stayed with the Hunters for awhile, and she met Artemis herself. It was impossible for her not to know. I just didn't know how far that knowledge extended.

"I can't help but notice how different you are," she whispered. "You're quieter. You don't get excited so easily. You seem bothered by something, and I can't do a thing to help since I don't know what's going on with you!"

I hesitated, "Lucy, I…I don't want to lie to you."

"Then tell me!" she insisted. She brought her hands to my shoulders, grasping them tightly. "I know you see me as only a little girl, Seth. That's why you take care of me, and you're always there for me whenever I need you, but let me help you for a change."
"I…I…" My voice died in my throat. No words came out. Lucy was giving me her ultimate attack: her innocent puppy dog eyes. Her brown eyes drooped slightly, staring at me earnestly. Since she had her hands on my shoulders still, I couldn't look anywhere but her face.

Oh my gods, Lucy's puppy face should be illegal. It was too adorable for words. How could I refuse her when she was looking like that?

Against my better judgment, I told her my plans.

I regretted that a second after I finished.

For a moment, Lucy didn't say a word. I noticed how her face had paled considerably, her eyes wide with horror, and her body continued to shake more violently. I lifted a hand to comfort her, but she suddenly took off running. I was so shocked by this sudden action that I sat there doing nothing for a few seconds before snapping out of my stupor.

"Lucy! Wait!" I yelled, getting up to run after her. She was ahead of me, but since I was the faster runner, I caught her by the crook of her arm. "Lucy, please…"

"No!" she screamed, pulling her arm loose from my grasp. She started hitting me on the chest with her fists. "I-I can't believe you! You can't go! You just can't!"

"I have to, Lucy," I said, trying not to appear hurt. "Look, I know this is hard to accept…!"

"Hard to accept?!" Lucy shouted. Tears started to form in her eyes. I winced when I saw them. "I had no idea! A-and Giselle, no, Artemis even let you go?"

"Don't make this harder for me than it already is," I said quietly. Lucy only sniffled. "Artemis understood that I had to do this. That was why she let me go."

"No, no, no, NO!" Lucy shook her head, stubbornly refusing to listen to my explanation. She stopped hitting me, and used her hands to cover her tear-streaked face. "Y-you…there's got to be another way! S-someone else can do it! Anyone else! As long as it's not you!"

I gave a disappointed frown. "Lucy, you're telling me it's fine that someone else risk their life just because you don't know them."

"What's wrong about that?!" she protested. "Everyone does it! It's not my fault that I rather see you safe than some stranger! I care about you, Seth, and I'm not the only one! I don't want you hurt and I don't want you to risk your life! Just like how you don't want me to be hurt! Why can't you understand that?"

"I do understand!" I exclaimed. "I've been debating over this for a very long time, Lucy! The reason why I accepted this is for your sake-!"

"Don't push this on me!" she said angrily. I flinched at her glare, wordless. "Don't tell me you're doing this for me! Ever! Do you know what I think, Seth Hunter!? I think you're trying to prove yourself to that stupid Camp! All you want is to get people to see you as some hero!"

I snapped.

"I'm not doing this for me!" I yelled. Lucy nearly choked in fright. She's never seen me this angry before, especially when it's directed at her. "It's never about me!"

Lucy took one look at my rage-filled face, and started running away from me again. I heard her cries
even as she disappeared out of sight. I slumped down on my knees, my palms touching the concrete sidewalk. I started to inhale and exhale repetitively. I stayed in that penitent state for awhile, my thoughts were in a mess. Finally, I forced myself to calm down.

_I'm a horrible brother_, I thought miserably. _Why did I scream at her like that? Oh gods, why did I even tell her? I hope you she made it back home._

I sighed, and finally got back up. My mind was in a daze as I finally found my way back to the Morrisons' home. I went inside, my face glum, and I soon found Mrs. Morrison in the kitchen preparing lunch.

"Hey Seth," she said. "Where's Lucy?"

I felt my heart plummet. "L-Lucy? She's not home?"

"No…" she said slowly. She stopped working on the food. "I thought she was with you?"

"I…we had a spat," I confessed. "I yelled at her, and she ran away. She knows this neighborhood well, and I assumed she found her way back on her own." I started to panic. "I-I should never had left her out of my sight!"

"Do you remember where you last saw her?" Mrs. Morrison said. I nodded. "Good. I'll call my husband. If she still doesn't turn up, we'll call the police."

I started apologizing. "I-I'm so sorry, Mrs. Morrison. If only I didn't get angry with her…"

"Seth, I know you didn't mean it." she placated, "and I'm sure Lucy knows that too. You need to calm down. My husband will be coming back soon. Wait for a few minutes, and you both may search together."

Every second seemed like an hour as I waited impatiently for Mr. Morrison to come back. When he finally arrived, the two of us retraced my steps back to where I last saw Lucy. I checked the park and southern half of the neighborhood while Mr. Morrison checked the other half and got some of the neighbors to help. Every empty street I saw filled my heart with dread. This neighborhood was still unfamiliar to me, and since Lucy was mortal (and had no traceable aura), my tracking abilities were useless. I felt sweat going down the side of my face as I ran from one street to the next, but Lucy has yet to show up. Eventually, I was out of breath, and I stopped and leaned against a traffic pole to steady myself.

I couldn't find her. Maybe Mr. Morrison did?

With that small lingering hope in my mind, I ran back. For the first time in a long while, I started to pray. I first prayed to Hera, the goddess of family, and then to Hestia, the goddess of the hearth, for Lucy's safety. I also prayed to Hermes, the god of travelers, to aid me on my quest, as well as Apollo, for it was during the day when Lucy had run away from me. Surely, Apollo might have seen where Lucy had gone off to? I prayed to each of them before I asked Artemis for guidance. By now, it was night, and the moon was starting to emerge…

I saw Mr. Morrison talking to a police officer.

Lucy was still missing.

There were a couple of police cruisers, and several officers were out with their dogs. Seeing their dogs, I suddenly realized something critical. I did have a last resort!
Lappy? Can you hear me? Lappy? I called desperately in my mind, before I recalled how Lappy was still giving me the silent treatment, and our standoff has been going on for weeks. We never made up, and Lappy avoided me after I finished training. Due to my pride and stubbornness, I didn't want to seek him out and admit I was wrong. Lappy was also stubborn to a fault, and refused to back down. I couldn't even remember the last time I saw the beagle sleep on my bed.

Lappy, please answer me!

There was no response.

I sucked in a breath, starting to get frantic and lose my cool. The heart started to beat so fast that my head started to pound along with it. If Lucy ended up lost or worse because of me… I didn't know what I would do.

I swallowed uneasily before I tried again. Lappy…I know you are still mad at me. I don't blame you for that. I…I have been a jerk lately, a-and I'm sorry. I really am sorry for acting like that for past couple of weeks. But Lucy is missing! You know, Lucy? The girl I told you about many times before? Yeah, she's missing, and it's my fault, Lappy. I yelled at her and scared her away. My temper got the best of me, and because of that, Lucy could be lost for good!

I slumped down, my knees giving out. I placed a hand over my mouth to quiet my raspy breaths.

I know you can find her, Lappy. You're the best tracker in the world. You've always stuck by me no matter what, and I guess I forgot to appreciate you for that. I wish that you forgive me, and I understand if you believe my actions are too spontaneous, but please tell me you find Lucy for me! If not for me, at least do it for Artemis! Please help-!

A voice interrupted my thoughts- then why are you just sitting there?

I spun around and saw Lappy's true form emerging from the other side of the street. I got up and ran towards him immediately. My eyes felt pricked.

"Lappy!" I cried. Without thinking, I immediately circled my arms around the bloodhound's muzzle. My face pressed against his fur tightly. "Lappy, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry!"

I know, Seth.

"B-but how did you get here so fast?" I wondered. "Even you're not that quick…"

Lappy tilted his head. I'll always remain loyal to you, Seth, even when I don't always agree with your decisions. Your safety and wellbeing is my priority. I'm always beside you and will be there for you when you need me.

His heartfelt words made me feel even worse. "I'm sorry for ignoring you, Lappy."

Lappy shifted, lowering down to my level. Enough apologies, Seth, we still need to find Lucy. Based on the scent I got from you, Lucy Morrison is close.

I saddled myself on top of Lappy, my face grim. I noticed Mr. Morrison still talking to some police officers on the other side of the street. None of them glanced our way. "Take me to her, Lappy. Can you do that for me?"

Lappy made a sound that could be mistaken for a chuckle. Of course, Seth-you need not ask.

We took off into the night. I leaned forward and my hands grasped the canine's scruff tightly. The
wind was harsh, causing my auburn hair and ends of my coat to fly all over the place. Buildings fleeted past, and the sky was dark, with the moon being its only source of light. Lappy came to a stop, and my eyes landed on an abandoned warehouse a dozen yards away. There was a wire fence around it, and the paint has long faded. Lappy crouched to let me down, and I stepped down silently. I would have thought the warehouse was abandoned if not for the two German shepherds tied down at the entrance. I gave a sniff. I smelled smoke and another weird smell. A moment later, my Apollo mind registered it as heroin.

"Is Lucy in there, Lappy?" I said quietly. Lappy nodded. 

She is, along with a couple mortals it seems.

I clenched my fists at my sides. "Mortals? Are you telling me…that Lucy was kidnapped by drug addicts?"

Yes.

I cursed under my breath. How in the world did Lucy manage to get herself kidnapped? Westwood wasn't known for any gang activity. Did she wander off that far? Or maybe stumbled upon them by accident? It didn't matter now. Lucy was inside that warehouse, and I was going to get her out.

"Stay put, Lappy," I said quietly. "I'll be back with Lucy."

Seth, that's too dangerous! Lappy protested. A majority of mortals who do illegal drug activity are armed-!

"Lucy is my responsibility," I insisted, "I was the one who got her into this mess, and it will be me who will get her out. Do you understand?"

Lappy dipped his head. Very well, Seth Hunter, but I'll give you only fifteen minutes. If you still haven't come out, I'm going in.

"Fine," I agreed before walking towards the barb wire fence, leaving Lappy behind.

I approached the two German shepherds guarding the entrance. They started barking when they saw me come out of the shadows. Their leashes were tied to the fence, their paws dug into the ground furiously, trying to break free of their restraints to bite me.

Staring straight into their eyes, I hissed. "Silence!"

The two canines abruptly stopped barking, and whimpered. Each of them sat down and tilted their heads, like they were bowing. I walked past them, and quickly untied their leashes. The dogs, seeing how they were freed, came up and nudged me to pet them. I knelt down and did just that.

"You two…are going to take me to your owners," I ordered. "Guide me to them. Can you do that?"

The dogs obeyed my request, and I followed the two German shepherds into the dark warehouse.

-o-

Lucy sat very still in her metal cage. Her hands and feet were tied with rope. She could still feel the dried up tears that ran down her cheeks, and her dirty blonde hair stuck to her skin. She watched her captors fearfully, regretting why she decided to take a detour so late at night, and accidentally bumping into gang members, who later abducted her to this place.
Despite how dark it was, she could tell she was in a warehouse, in one of their closed off compartments. There were a pair of doors to her right, and there were tables of these strange devices brewing and grinding a type of white powder. The smell was so strong that Lucy struggled to breathe properly. There were at least ten armed men surrounding her at all sides. There were empty racks sprawled out, and there were staircases that led up to a thin railing circumventing the room. She saw one guy sitting there with a rifle tucked beside his arm.

By now, her anger towards her brother was long forgotten. Lucy couldn't even bring herself to stay mad at him anymore. Once her anger diminished, her thoughts finally decided to understand where Seth was coming from, making her realize how selfish she acted. Lucy could still remember the hurt that flashed across Seth's eyes when she left him back there, alone. Every time she recalled that memory Lucy wanted to curl up into a tight ball and cry her heart out.

But she couldn't do that. Not when her captors were right there and can see her vulnerabilities. She had to stay strong- Seth would have wanted her to do that. Back at the orphanage, Lucy had faced some bullies, girls her age who criticized her looks, who she was, and probably for being too close to Seth. Deep down, Seth was everyone's role model. He was always there to help, to listen to their problems. Lucy couldn't recall anyone who didn't like him for this, and because he was so well-liked, the other girls didn't like Lucy hogging him.

Eventually, Seth did find out about her being bullied. No matter how many times Lucy tried to keep something from him, Seth always managed to figure it out. She never knew how he knew, but in the end, she was glad he did. Seth later had a chat with her bullies, who eventually apologized weeks later. He also told her to stay firm in the face of opposition; to not let insults bother her, making her more resilient towards enemies. Seth had taught her to be strong and independent, and she took his advice to heart.

Now, Lucy wanted nothing more than to hug Seth tightly and say sorry. She snifflled, and then sucked in a breath. She wouldn't cry. She had to trust Seth, and her parents. If there was anyone who could find her, it would be them.

"What should we do with this brat?" one of her captors said to their leader, a buff guy with numerous tattoos over his bare arms. Lucy swallowed heavily when said leader turned his beady eyes towards her, making Lucy want to cower.

"I'm not sure…" their leader grinned, revealing a row of yellow teeth. Lucy nearly flinched. "We can keep her as a pet…or have her become one of our sellers, free of charge. Children are always so easily swayed."

He gestured his head towards a table of white powder, and Lucy suddenly realized that the white powder were drugs. Despite her attempts to remain calm, Lucy could feel her hands trembling.

The leader got up from his seat, the steady sound of his lumberjack boots made Lucy's heartbeat speed up. She backed away as far as she could as the man leered down at her.

"What would you like to do, girl?" he asked. "You want to be a seller or a pet?"

Lucy forced herself to answer. "I-I want to go home."

"Wrong answer," he smirked, before sneering at a man lounging on his chair. "Roy! How about you get your lazy ass up and hand me one of those needles?"

Lucy froze.
The one known as Roy got up from his metal chair and handed the man the needle. It was like one of those needles the doctor used to give Lucy a flu shot. Except, this needle wasn't filled with a vaccine.

"Do you know what this is?" the man said. Lucy was too scared to answer. She tried to tug her hands free, but the rope only dug into her skin painfully. "This is your ticket to go home. One shot of this, and you can leave. What d'ya-?"

The sound of barking interrupted him. The man spat out vulgarly and cursed. "Connie, Mike, go check out what's disturbing the dogs!" The two men nodded, took their guns out of their holsters, and walked through the doors. Seconds later, gunshots sounded and rounds of screaming followed.

The rest of the gang members tensed, taking their weapons out—guns, knives, and rifles. Lucy had never seen so many dangerous weapons at once. She hoped that her parents or Seth had found her, but she also didn't want to see them potentially hurt.

Suddenly, the lights started to flicker, and a door creaked open…

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The two men, Connie and Mike, walked down the aisle carefully. Their guns were drawn, and they kept their eyes straight ahead. There were stacks of dust-coated bags and manufacture goods that have expired long ago. The lights gave off a dim glow, making the hall only partially lit. The dogs were barking still, and as they drew nearer to the entrance, the German shepherds appeared. The freed pets caught them by surprise.

Connie cursed. "Someone didn't tie the leashes tight enough! Worried us for nothing…"

"I'll tell the boss," Mike muttered, annoyed. "Let's get these mutts-!"

"Bite them."

The two dogs suddenly lunged forward and bit Connie's arm, causing him to scream. Mike stumbled as the second dog pounced on him, his gun flew out of his hand, and the two fought on the ground wrestling. Connie eventually got his finger over the trigger and shot the rabid German shepherd's head. He pushed his body over, heaving large breathes before he had the strength to shoot the other dog down. Mike remained still.

"Mike!" Connie shouted. There were bite marks and gashes all over his face and arms. He ran over to help him. "Mike-!"

He felt someone drop over his shoulders. He was hanging from above…?! Connie shot wildly, trying to shoot his attacker. He felt his enemy's legs fastened over his neck before his attacker arched backwards, his feet still locked around his head, and brought his whole body down headfirst to the concrete floor. Connie's eyes rolled back, his mind blanked out immediately.

"Two down…" Seth muttered darkly. He stood back up, and noticing the two dead dogs, he dipped his head in respect. "Your service won't be forgotten."

He went over to check on the second man, and his mind registered that the man was dead. The dog had bitten into vital arteries around the neck. He was long gone. Seth crouched to pick up the man's gun, and reshuffled it in his hand. Now, he had a weapon he can use against these mortals.

His silver eyes landed on a dull yellow stand with a bunch of buttons. Seth noted the words 'Power' and that was enough reason for him to raise his gun and shoot the power controls. The stand caught on fire and combusted from the inside out. He felt his mouth widening as rows of light started to go
Seth knew that the others were grouped behind that door. He could hear their frantic breathing and hearts. Before opening the door, Seth leaned on one wall, and twisted the knob slowly. The door creaked open, and instantly, rounds of gunfire shot forth. Seth waited for the gunfire to cease, and looked through the door's hinges. His night vision allowed him to see where each of his enemies was standing, as well as a large six-foot cage holding Lucy prisoner.

Seth closed his eyes, and envisioned the hand grenades that lied on his desk at Walt's. He felt two round devices drop into his open palms, and without a second thought, Seth swerved around and threw them into the room. He heard men shouting in alarm, and ran away in different directions before the grenades exploded, unleashing a burst of Greek fire. Using that distraction, Seth charged in, jumping above the flames, and shot some of the retreating men in the legs or arms before reaching Lucy's cage.

Lucy was teary eyed, and seeing her dirtied and bound up state infuriated him. "Seth, I'm so sorry…"

"I know," he said. "Let's get you out of here. Please move back for a moment." Lucy scooted as far back as she could before Seth lifted the gun and shot the lock to pieces. The cage door swung open and Seth summoned a pocket knife to cut the ropes around Lucy's wrists and ankles loose.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" he questioned. Lucy shook her head. "Good."

He lifted Lucy up, his arms over her back and the crook of her legs. Lucy circled her arms around him tightly, her face pressed against his shoulder. He stood up and noticed the drug dealers were recovering from their shock, and a few started to aim. Lucy gave a muffled scream as Seth ran through the array of gunfire and out of the room. He clenched his teeth, trying to silence the pain. He kept running with Lucy secured in his arms. He could hear the thugs chasing after him. Since they were mortal, the Greek fire couldn't harm them. They would catch up to them soon.

He let Lucy down, breathing heavily. His vision was starting to become unfocused. He lowered his hand to his side, and his fingers felt liquid. Seth cursed silently. One of the mortals had shot him. He could tell the wound wasn't deep, but the bullet was still inside him. His body wouldn't be able to heal properly without taking the bullet out. No wonder he felt so dizzy. He couldn't carry Lucy any further without losing more blood.

They continued walking, and it was a struggle for Seth to even focus on putting one foot in front of the other. His mind was in a daze, and his breaths were getting shallower. He probably looked like shit. The doors appeared before him, and Lucy rushed forward to open them before Seth pulled her back. Shadowy figures emerged, and all of them were armed with various weapons.

Keeping Lucy close to him, Seth didn't even give his enemies a chance to prepare. He summoned his new gun back to him and shot the ones with artillery weapons first. There were shouts of pain before Seth slung Lucy over on one shoulder, and opened the doors. True to his word, Lappy was there waiting for them.

*Seth, are you alright?!* Lappy panicked. *What do you need me to do?*

"I'm fine, Lappy," Seth forced out. "We need to make a quick getaway."

"Whoa…" Lucy said, seeing Lappy for the first time. "You're a really big dog, but not as big as Clifford."

*Clifford?* Lappy said, confused. *Who's Clifford?*
"I'll tell you later," Seth answered quickly. The thugs were coming out. "Lucy, Lappy- He's a friend of mine. Artemis was the one who allowed Lappy to stay with me."

"Nice to meet you, Lappy," Lucy said. Lappy gave Lucy a sloppy lick, making her laugh a little.

Lappy lowered himself down so Lucy could climb up, but Seth didn't climb up immediately. Instead, there was a dark look in his eyes as he suddenly summoned a couple grenades. The men were coming outside to stop them. Like a star pitcher, Seth threw the grenades with all his might, causing a large explosion that caused Lucy to scream and Lappy to stagger from the tremendous noise.

The fires lit up, causing those who were too close to be incinerated completely. Seth could hear the insides of the warehouse crashing down, and the windows were all lit aflame. He felt his lips curling as he took in the flames. The grenades he threw were lethal to mortals, and it would take a lot of Lady Tyche's blessing to survive that.

_No one harms those I care about and gets away with it!_ Seth thought with malice. It didn't matter to him that they were mortals. They had kidnapped his sister, locked her up in a cage, and probably would have drugged her or worse if he hadn't made it in time. In his eyes, those crimes made his actions justifiable.

Lappy approached him with Lucy on his back. **Seth…why did you throw those grenades?**

Seth narrowed his eyes. _What do you mean, Lappy?_ You didn't need to throw them, Lappy replied. _I could have gotten you and Lucy out of here safely, and my speed will make it impossible for them to track us._

_Lappy, Seth began, you need to understand something: those mortals were FILTH. They're drug dealers, child abductors, and more. I only did society a favor by ridding them completely. Is that so wrong?_

_It's wrong when you decide to take the law into your own hands!_ Lappy argued.

"Seth, I'm tired," Lucy said, oblivious of their conversation. "I-I want to go home."

Seth smiled weakly. "Of course, Lucy. Let's get you back to your parents." He struggled to seat himself next to Lucy.

Unfortunately, Lappy didn't let him off the hook. _Mark my words, Seth. We WILL be discussing this later, and your mother will hear of this!_ Instead of being offended like Lappy predicted, Seth was amused. _You're going to tell on me? I wish you good luck._

_Artemis will hear of your actions, Lappy growled, your violent tendencies need to be-!

_Violent tendencies, he interrupted. That's hardly violent. It's not like I…like… _

Seth suddenly slouched forward, his forehead leaning against Lucy's shoulder, his body limp. Lucy gasped, finally noticing Seth's now bloodied right hand and jacket. He must have got it after they got out of her cage, Lucy was sure of it.

"Lappy, Seth's injured!" she cried, frantic with worry. "Please, please get him help!"

Lappy responded with a nod, and quickly left the destroyed warehouse behind.
Two days later…

"Lady Artemis, I do not mean to intrude," Lynetta began. She stood by the door of Seth's bedroom. The goddess of the hunt was seated beside the occupied bed, and was watching him sleep peacefully. "But are you sure it's alright for you to stay this long?"

Artemis remained where she was; her silver eyes only flickered to Lynetta briefly before directing them back at her unconscious heir. "I'm sure, Lynetta Lin. Don't worry."

After receiving an urgent message from her familiar, Artemis wasted no time in trying to reach them. She appeared before Lappy, Seth, and Lucy in Westwood, New Jersey. She had seen Lucy crying in her adoptive mother's arms and apologizing many times for running off. Artemis had introduced herself to Lucy's parents, and she wasn't surprised by how the mortals were startled by her appearance.

Lappy was in his Mist form, and told her that Seth needed medical help immediately. Seeing his pale countenance, she'd teleported Seth and Lappy to Forger's home, much to the occupants' shock. She carried Seth upstairs and set him down on his bed. She lifted part of his shirt up and recognized it as a gunshot wound. Artemis concentrated hard before visualizing the bullet that lied in Seth's body and willed the thing to vanish.

Without the bullet occupying his body, Seth's healing abilities kicked in and the wound sealed itself completely within an hour. While Seth slumbered on, her familiar had told her all sorts of new things.

*He's become too violent.* Lappy had said to her. *I do not know how or when Seth became this merciless. He sentenced those mortals to death at a whim! Not to mention what happened with Antiphates…*

Oh yes, the Laistrygonian king, Artemis recalled. She had been watching that night, and she'd be lying if she said she wasn't troubled by Seth's display of sadism. She suddenly recalled her brother's warning months earlier.

"*Make sure you watch Seth Hunter closely,*" he said ominously. "*Make sure you are there for him, even when he wants to be alone. Be a good listener. Your involvement and Seth's own willingness will determine how his prophecy, and the coming war, will end.*"

She hated Apollo for doing this to her: springing up omens that she wasn't allowed to question, but to accept them as they were. Sometimes, she wished her twin didn't confront the Great Python of Delphi, and instead, allowed another deity to do it. Ever since her twin was named the god of prophecies, Apollo became more unbearable and self-conceited. Not to mention his ego, growing larger than what Artemis thought possible.

Still, Artemis took heed of her brother's advice. She watched Seth progress through Walt's training at a fast rate. She watched some of his missions, and she tried to be available when Seth needed her—except, Seth wasn't one to ask for help. He never asked unless he had no other choice, and he often relied on her brother or Hermes for help, and just recently, Nemesis.

There were no words to describe the anger Artemis felt when she discovered how the minor goddess had *stolen* her heir. How dare she take Seth from her! Seth was hers, and no one else's! That was how it should be. Instead, Artemis was reduced to second place after Seth accepted Nemesis as his patron. If she had known Nemesis was going to make a move on Seth, she would have done everything in her power to prevent it.
Unfortunately, by the time she realized this, it was already too late. Artemis never trusted Nemesis. The goddess was too unpredictable at times, and her allegiance was only to herself. It was unlike her to suddenly seek out a champion, which was why she's keeping an eye on the shady goddess as well.

She noticed Seth fidget in his sleep, and wondered if Seth was dreaming. It was...unnerving how much Seth had changed since the beginning of the year. His features were more harsh, his face pale and gaunt. He was more lean and muscular, and his silver eyes...whenever Seth stared at her, it was almost like he was continuously plotting something. He seemed more guarded, on edge, and the innocence Artemis saw during their first meeting was completely gone now.

She stood up, reluctantly darting her gaze elsewhere, and left the room with Lynetta.

There were matters she needed to discuss with Walt Forger.

-A-

"A change in his persona?" Walt repeated, placing his hand to his chin. He appeared thoughtful. Lynetta was by the door, listening. "I'll say Hunter has grown more...mature. Is that what you mean?"

"Sort of," Artemis answered, "but I can't help but feel like something's missing. Lappy told me how Seth has gotten more volatile lately. One moment, he was apologizing to Lappy for a previous slight, and the next, they're at odds again. I'm wondering what kind of training you're putting him through."

"Well, you're aware of the physical aspects already, so I'll spare that explanation," Walt began. "I also had him do piano lessons to help him with his fatal flaw."

"How is that coming along?"

"Pretty well," Walt replied, "Hunter has finally got the hang of playing a new assigned piece each week, and the way he handles his emotions and facial expressions has improved."

Artemis narrowed her eyes. "In what way?"

"What do you mean?"

"Seth has improved, I can see that," she said, "but how is he fostering those improvements? Is he calmer or more at peace with himself? Or has his newfound control allow him to become more violent?"

Walt frowned. "You know I don't promote violence, Lady Artemis."

"I'm aware," she said, "that's not what I was asking. I'm asking if you are aware of how Seth..."

Artemis stopped when she heard a pair of footsteps enter the room. She turned and noticed Seth, still in his sleepwear, stand beside Lynetta. Their eyes met, and Seth drew a look of surprise.

"Lady Artemis," he greeted politely, "I didn't know you were here."

"How are you, Seth?" she asked, walking towards him. She noticed how his face wasn't as pale as before. "You shouldn't be up so soon. You need to rest."

"I'm fine," he said, his gaze not meeting hers. She didn't notice Lynetta's eyes widening in alarm. "What were you guys talking about?"
Before Artemis could answer, the daughter of Athena suddenly lashed forward and drew a loaded gun at Seth's temple. Several things happened at once: Walt stood up behind his desk, about to demand answers from his assistant while Artemis quickly summoned her knives and pointed one at Lynetta's throat. Seth had his mouth agape, clearly taken off guard. Lappy also happened to enter the room with the intention of speaking to Artemis, but when he saw what had transpired, he quickly leaped between Seth and Lynetta, posed to attack.

"Lady Artemis, I can explain…" Lynetta said, eying her weapon warily.

Artemis glared at her. "It better be sufficient because you've just committed a great offense."

"Lynetta," Walt said slowly. "Why are you doing this?"

"That's my question," Seth cut in. He raised his hands up in surrender, and gave an uneasy smile. "Did I do something wrong?"

Lynetta swallowed. "Mr. Forger, do you remember that theory I told you about months earlier? It appears I am right."*

"Theory?" Walt repeated, confused. He took a moment to recall it. When he did, he stared at Seth briefly before his face relaxed, and sat back down. "Oh, I see…" *

"What theory are you talking about?" Artemis demanded. "I see no reason why you would threaten my child's life!"

"I wasn't going to hurt him, Lady Artemis," Lynetta reassured her. She lowered her gun, but Artemis still kept the knife up. "I would never intentionally harm a student outside of training. I only wanted to demand answers from him, and by using force, he will answer more honestly."

"Answers?" Artemis echoed incredulously. Seth's smile disappeared, and his face turned stoic. "What kind of answers?"

Instead of answering, Lynetta directed her attention towards Seth, who was staring at her narrowly. "You should have known better than to reveal yourself in my presence. My mother is Athena, the goddess of battle, and as her daughter, I have the ability to identify our allies and enemies."* 

"Reveal himself…enemy…what is she talking about? Artemis wondered. She looked down and noticed her familiar sitting back down, no longer trying to attack. Lappy, do you understand what she's saying?"

"I should have noticed this earlier," Lappy confessed. "It suddenly makes so much sense. He must have been suppressing his aura in order to avoid my detection for this long….

"Aura…"

Artemis decided to withdraw her weapons, allowing Lynetta let out a sigh of relief. She directed her eyes at Seth, who suddenly grew very quiet. "Seth, what is going on?"

Seth ignored her, instead, he smirked at Lynetta. "Interesting. I never knew children of Athena had that ability. You really are something else, Lynetta. I can't seem to hide anything from you." He gave a chuckle. "I guess that's what makes you admirable."

Lynetta gave a light smile. "What did I say about underestimating your peers?"

"My bad, I'll try to improve on that aspect." Seth grinned. He walked past Artemis, stretched his
arms out, before plopping down on one of the couches comfortably. Artemis remained confused, and Seth noticed this. "You still need a hint, Artemis? Then I'll give you one. I'm tired of hiding anyway."

Artemis felt a surge of energy hit her, and realized that Seth had uncapped his aura. She focused on it, and it didn't take long to realize how different it was. The aura she normally felt from Seth was calm, free, with a hint of transgression and morbidity. It was similar to hers, and it shared a common characteristic with the Camp Half-Blood campers. Now, Seth's aura was turbulent, unstable, with surges of aggression and passion. But it also had a restricted, orderly feel similar to Forger's…

She widened her eyes in surprise. "You…you mean you're actually…!"

"Yes," the boy answered, smiling. "I am Seth's Roman half. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

-o-

Chapter End Notes

*Chapter 11, if anyone is curious.
"So," the boy started. He glanced at each of them curiously. "How long have you known I was there, Lynetta?"

"Ever since we talked about your goals," she answered. "I worked with Mr. Forger for awhile, so I knew what Roman demigods were like. I identified the change in your aura immediately."

'Seth' was impressed. "You're telling me…that you decided to talk about me with Walt behind my back instead of confronting my Greek half about it?" Lynetta didn't reply. "That's clever of you, Lynetta. I think I respect you even more now."

He turned his gaze towards Walt. "How about you, Walt? You don't seem too surprised either. Did you not doubt Lynetta's theory about me?"

"I was…kind of expecting it, actually," Walt confessed, causing Artemis to look at him with surprise.

"You were?" Artemis asked.

He nodded, putting his hands together in front of him. "When I met Hunter for the first time, I thought I…tease him a little. You told me that he was from Camp Half-Blood, so I automatically assumed he was a Greek demigod. When I first greeted him, I spoke in Latin to gauge his reaction. Instead of being puzzled by what I said, he responded back in perfect fluency. I didn't know what to think. Some Greeks I know can speak a little Latin, but it's usually accompanied with an accent. Hunter didn't have any."

"Why did you not tell me this?" Artemis said.

"I thought you knew," he said. "Is…is that not the case, Lady Artemis?"

Artemis didn't answer. When she made him, she was in her true divine form, neither fully Greek nor Roman. So when Seth came into being, his identity remained unfocused until it was decided at the Winter Solstice meeting. Her Father and the Olympians, she knew, were apprehensive of Seth's abilities and potential, and ordered Artemis to place him under their watch. That was why Camp Half Blood, which was located near Olympus, was chosen instead of Camp Jupiter. Once the decision was reached, she became Artemis. Her Greek presence should have been enough for Seth to adapt to that identity, but now…she knew it didn't end up that way.

"I'm surprised, Artemis," Seth's Roman half said, "I thought you of all people would have known about my existence." He gave a half-hearted chuckle. "I guess not huh…"

"How long were you there?" Artemis replied. "Were you already a part of Seth before Lynetta found out about you?"
Instead of answering, the boy scowled, looking offended. "A part of? What in Hades, Artemis? I'm not some parasite that decided to latch on to Seth! I am Seth Hunter. Just like how you and Diana are one and the same. I've been with him since the beginning."

Artemis didn't know how to respond to that. Seth's Roman counterpart was baffling, and as she studied him further, she noticed distinct differences in their personality. Seth was more closed off, quiet, stoic, and spoke only when addressed or out of necessity. He was calm and well-mannered, but he can also lose his temper when provoked. His Roman counterpart, on the other hand, was more expressive. He stated his opinions immediately, and he was quick to retaliate on what he found offending. He was more confident and sure of himself, but also brash.

"You said you were with him 'since the beginning'," Lynetta recalled. "If that's so, why do you appear now and not before?"

'Seth's' eyes narrowed. "It depends on how you define 'appear'. If you're talking about me gaining control of this body, then the first time happened only this year. But if you're talking about my conscious…well, I've seen everything. To sum it all up, the reason why I can appear before you all as I am now…"

His silver eyes wandered around the room before they landed on Walt. He lifted a finger at him. "It's because of him."

Almost immediately, Artemis whirled around and glared accusingly at Walt Forger, like it was his fault her child was like this.

"Me?" Walt said incredulously, a bit shaky under Artemis' glare. "W-what did I do?!"

"You are Roman," he pointed out. "Your origins are what allowed my other half to have knowledge of the Roman demigods, and to an extent, me. Since birth, it was my other half that took the reins while I subconsciously watched him. I was there throughout his childhood, and I was there throughout his battles, but I was merely a voice, easily mistaken as being 'part' of his Greek mentality."

He shifted on the couch to stretch out his arms and waist. "Of course, that all changed when my other half came here. 'Seth' became aware of Roman demigods, and ever since he learned of their existence, he did extensive research on them. Books, web sources, you name it. As his knowledge on them grew, so did I. Your presence, Walt, also allowed me to be more…involved. I became his voice of reason, and eventually, I was prominent enough to participate in some of the missions, and I even had the chance to speak with one of our friends directly."

He sighed contently, and smiled as he furled and unfurled his hand in front of him. "Life was good."

Artemis pursed her lips. There's been something she'd wanted to ask. "What about my child? Does he know you're here now?"

"I would think so," he said. "I did show myself to him for the first time after the match with you, Artemis. If he still hasn't put two and two together…" He gave a laugh, startling her. She never heard Seth laugh like that before. "That would be so, so awkward. I'll make sure to have a chat with him later to clarify things."

"Do you…get along well with him?" she wondered.

"You know how every relationship isn't perfect," he started. "My Greek half and I…well, there is stuff I'm certain we agree on, but there's also stuff that we can't see eye to eye. We are the same
person, so I share the same goals, interests, and quirks my other half has. But how we reach those goals, however, is something else entirely."

"What about the memories?" Lynetta suddenly asked. She shared a glance with Artemis. "My Lady, I recall how gods with different aspects sometimes forget what their other half is doing. They suffer partial amnesia when their mind is occupied by their other half, right?"

"That's true," she answered. "When I'm Diana, it takes awhile to remember what I've done while I'm her. The memories may slowly come back, or they may not."

"Exactly," Lynetta agreed. "Yet, I don't recall Seth ever saying he doesn't remember anything."

They stared at the Roman boy for answers.

"I try to keep myself open to my other half as much as possible," he said, "I don't see any reason why I should hide my actions unless proven necessary. You can say I trust my other half completely. He is me after all. Since I don't block any memories from him, my Greek half won't have any sort of amnesia. Except that first time though…I accidentally blocked out one of my battles from him, and my Greek self ended up with a terrible migraine. But don't worry," he said, giving Artemis a smile. "I've finally perfected my control over our memories. Your child won't end up suffering because of me."

Artemis blinked, was that a caring tone she detected? "You care about him?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I?" the Roman said, "I rather not be at war with myself. It's better to establish a mutual understanding—an accord. It benefits both parties."

This was…unusual. When Diana first appeared during the Roman era, Artemis didn't get along with her at first. She was too militaristic, too ruthless when dealing with mortals, especially males. Diana was more strict and orderly than Artemis was, and her Roman aspect valued the art of hunting far more than her other domains, like the moon and childbirth. As the Roman civilization died down, it was only then that Artemis and Diana finally reached a compromise—unlike her half sister, Athena. Athena was a Greek goddess, and even her Roman counterpart, Minerva, wanted to be like her. Minerva despised the Romans, and she hated the role she was given by them. Her hate towards the Romans made her jealous of Athena's reputation, and that was why the two never got along.

To hear that Seth's Roman half was so quick to accept her child was a relief.

"What should we call you?" Walt asked. "We need a name to differentiate between the two of you."

"Oh yeah," the boy muttered, thinking. "I mean, I don't really mind if I'm called Seth too. Apollo's like that, but I guess it can be confusing."

"Do you have a preference?" Artemis asked.

The boy thought about it, before his eyes widened. "I got it! How about you address me as Hunter? Get it? Seth Hunter?" He clapped his hands together and laughed at his own joke. "Seth came first, and I followed. It makes sense."

Artemis gave a wary smile. "Yes, I suppose it does."

"Wait," Lynetta said, "names are significant. What if every time a Greek demigod calls Seth by his last name, and then you appear? That would complicate things, especially when the Greeks and Romans are supposed to be unaware of each other."
"Good question," Hunter said. "The thing is...I can now control when I want to appear. I can choose to appear in a crowd of Greek demigods, just like how Seth can appear among Romans. I'm not restricted like you, Artemis. Your personas are defined by what the mortals believe you to be like. That's probably why you and mother keep secrets from each other, thus the amnesia."

Artemis hitched a breath. Did Hunter say what she thought she heard him say?

"I act how I want to act. I don't have regulations I need to follow like you do. If someone wants to call Seth my name, fine! But it doesn't mean I'll appear instead. I'll note the situation and I'm sure Seth will too..." He trailed off when he noticed Artemis staring at him. "Yes?"

"You called Diana your mother."

"Yes, I did," Hunter answered. "Is something wrong?"

Artemis swallowed. "Why doesn't Seth call me that?"

He shrugged. "I can't answer for him, but all I can say is that I see you as the cause of our tragedy. You were the one that decided to lie to Seth for over two years. Diana didn't, hence, why I have a better relationship with Lady Diana than Seth does with you."*

Artemis felt like something icy cold pricked her.

Hunter stretched out his arms again, and yawned. "You know what? I think I'm still pretty tired. I still haven't regained the amount of blood I lost. Do you mind if I take a short break in my room, Walt?"

Walt nodded. He couldn't refuse even if he wanted to with Artemis right there. "That's fine."

The boy got up, and Artemis noticed her familiar trailing beside him. She just realized Lappy hadn't said a word this whole time. Maybe he only wanted to listen?

Hunter gave a backwards wave. "See ya!" He walked out and closed the door behind him.

"I...suppose that answers my earlier question," Artemis said to Walt, who nodded in reply. "This concludes my visit. I also want you to report to me any changes in my child's disposition, both Seth and Hunter. Yes?"

"I'll do that," Walt muttered. Just when he thought Seth was troublesome enough, he had to have two versions of him. He rubbed his temple absentmindedly as Artemis greeted Lynetta one last time before she departed from his home.

He sighed. He was getting too old for this.

-o-

Lappy followed Hunter to his room quietly, and as the Roman child sat down on his bed, he finally noticed him.

"Hey, Lappy!" he greeted happily, smiling from ear to ear. "Nice to meet you! This is the first time I introduced myself to you isn't it?"

Lappy only stared at him, still troubled by the fact that Hunter managed to avoid him for so long. It damaged his pride as a tracker. If Lynetta hadn't pointed out that slight difference in his aura, Lappy might have dismissed it entirely.
"What's wrong, Lappy?" Hunter prodded. "Are you still mad about earlier? Or maybe you're still in denial about my existence? Which is it?"

How did I not notice you earlier? Lappy finally said, voicing out his unease. How did you manage to evade me? Even if you suppressed your aura, I should have been able to smell you out.

"Oh that," Hunter said, rolling his eyes. "It wasn't that hard really. Like you said, I suppressed my aura, and whenever you were nearby, I had Seth take over instead. Plus, you were avoiding me these last few weeks too. Don't beat yourself over it, Lappy."

But you were there when we rescued Lucy, Lappy pointed out. That was you, wasn't it? You were the one who threw those grenades and killed those mortals.

Hunter's eyes turned cold. "So what if it was me? I still think those bastards deserved it."

Even if they had wronged you, you shouldn't have had to kill them! Lappy insisted. Lucy was already safe. All of us could have gotten away with no trouble at all.

Hunter smirked, like he found something funny. "You...are one narrow-minded dog, Lappy."

Lappy twitched at the insult. What makes you say that?

"It's called preventive measures," Hunter replied. "Lucy may have escaped unharmed, but who's to say when those scumbags decide to kidnap another child? By ending that group for good, I may have saved dozens of other children that might suffer the same fate Lucy went through, but worse."

Lappy growled. Are you trying to be some arbiter? You are not a god Hunter-!

"No, I'm not," he agreed, "but those who are don't give two shits about any of this. Besides, I am no vigilante. I don't go around saving people I can care less about. As long as the people I cherish are safe, then I won't need to lift a finger."

Lappy was in disbelief. So basically...you're telling me, that as long as the people you know are safe, you can care less if the rest of the world burns down.

Hunter gave a mock-appalled look. "Of course I would care about the world! I need a house to sleep in! Whip cream pies to eat and buy! I can't do that anywhere else but on earth."

Hunter! Lappy barked, angered by his sarcasm. I am being serious! You need to be more mature about this!

"And you, Lappy, need to take a chill pill," Hunter retorted, crossing his arms. "Jeez, can't you take a joke? No wonder my Greek half is always so, so serious. With you around, Seth can't ever relax!"

Seth understands what is at stake, Lappy said, trying to calm down. He is trying his hardest to improve, to become stronger so he can protect those he cares about.

"That's what I said-!"

...without having to use blackmail, coercion, or torture, Lappy finished. You, on the other hand, use those petty methods in order to achieve what you want. That makes Seth far more successful than you can ever be.

Hunter's silver eyes darkened, his lips twisted into a snarl. "Let's get one thing straight here, dog—I am an extremist, and like my name suggests, I am a hunter. When I see something I want, I get it. If
someone stops me from getting what I want, I put a stop to them. It's said that all is fair in love and war, and a war is brewing right outside! Your moralistic ideals are outdated, Laelaps! And despite what you may think, Seth agrees with me!"

No…Lappy whispered. **He does not!**

"Oh yes, he does!" Hunter declared. "You keep forgetting that Seth and I are one! Who do you think made me into who I am? Seth did! He understood what needs to be done in order to win, to be on top! He will be the strategist, and I will be his shield and sword. I will *crush* any opposition with no mercy!"

For a moment, Lappy was speechless. How did Seth end up having a sadistic persona like Hunter become his counterpart? Was Hunter a result of Seth's negative emotions and stress? Did Seth really agree with any of this? Hunter had mentioned how Seth had no memory loss. That would mean he was aware of Hunter's actions, yet he didn't put a stop to him.

He has definitely changed for the worse, Lappy thought to himself. He still remembered how Seth nearly cried when he didn't answer him a couple times about Lucy. He had seen Seth go out of his way to help Will Solace and the Apollo campers get by after Lee's death, and how he and Percy Jackson also shared camaraderie and watched out for each other in Quests and Capture the Flag. He was told how Seth had humbled himself before the Hunters of Artemis, and had begged for their forgiveness and acceptance when he realized he had wronged them.

That was why he couldn't believe Hunter's claims about Seth supporting his actions. The Seth he knew and cared for, was kind, patient, and understanding. He couldn't have resorted to this level of violence. There were times he would get angry at Artemis, but Lappy could tell it was mostly out of grief rather than rage, and he guessed that was the reason why his mistress tolerated Seth's insults instead of turning him into a jackaloupe.

*I don't believe you,* Lappy said at last. *I've known Seth for awhile now, and I may not know how you ended up the way you are, Hunter, but I doubt Seth had a say in it.*

Hunter lifted his chin, and scoffed. "Keep dreaming, Lappy. Seth stands on *my* side. The sooner you realize this, the better." He lay down on the covers and turned to his side, his back facing the beagle on the floor. "I don't feel like talking anymore."

Despite the rather rude dismissal, Lappy obliged and left Hunter alone in his room. When he did so, Hunter soon fell into a deep sleep.

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I was here again. In that dark void that existed in one small part of my mind. My feet were bare once more, and again, I was dressed in the same formal clothes. I'd been coming here a lot lately. Instead of a velvety chair like last time, my body was rested on a silvery bed, my head pressed against a soft pillow. I shifted myself up, and I suddenly recalled the gunshot wound I got earlier. I looked down, and brushed my hand over my side. It was healed.

I looked around. It was dark, but my eyes could make out the smooth black floor, and this time, there was furniture. I saw a standard desk and armchair, along with a dresser and mirror situated right next to it. Above me, I saw a large silver chandelier, and the lights…instead of a white light, they glowed red.

I heard footsteps approach, and I turned and noticed another me enter the room with a stool in his hand. He placed the stool down beside the edge of my bed and sat down on it. His-my- silver eyes
narrowed in concern.

"Did you sleep well, Seth?" he asked. He looked worried.

I nodded. "H-how did I get here again?"

The other me thought about it. "I believe you blanked out when the bullet entered your body. That's how you ended up here."

"I see," I murmured. I felt my stomach growl in hunger, and the other me noticed it too.

"Are you hungry?" he wondered.

I was sheepish. "Kind of. I'll eat something when I wake up."

"Good idea," my other self agreed, before he folded his hands together, his face stern. "Seth…do you know who I am?"

"You…you're me," I answered, narrowing my eyes. "Aren't you?"

"Yes, but be a little more specific," the other me pressed. "Do you know what I am to you?"

Suddenly, a swarm of memories appeared before my eyes, and I saw myself talking to Walt, Lynetta, Artemis, and then Lappy. I heard the conversation I had between all of them. As the images died down, I lowered my head, my hands to my stomach. My other half stood up and placed a hand gently over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "I shouldn't have sent you those so quickly when you just finished recovering." He reached over and propped up more pillows, so my back can lean against them comfortably.

I pushed his hand away from me. "I'm fine. I was just…startled. I suspected, but I wasn't sure at first." I looked at him curiously. "So you're my Roman half huh? Hunter…it has a nice ring to it."

Hunter smiled. "You idiot, it's your name too."

"Yeah, I suppose so," I said with a brief smile of my own. "So um, Hunter…I don't know where to begin. It's pretty awkward having a conversation with myself. People might mistake me as insane."

"Other people aren't like us," Hunter deadpanned.

"True," I murmured. I reflected on what I heard from those images- memories- that Hunter sent me. I frowned when I heard how he (me) got into a spat with Lappy. "You didn't need to be so rude to Lappy, Hunter. I just made up with him too, and now I need to apologize again."

"He's angry at me, not you." Hunter pointed out. "It's not my fault Lappy refuses to understand my side of things."

"You told him I supported you."

"Yes…" he said softly. "Don't you?"

I hesitated. "Yes…and no." Hunter's face looked so crestfallen that I immediately clarified. "It's just…Look, I get how violence and coercion can get others to do what we want, but torture? Hunter, you don't need to torture people longer than it is necessary."
"When is considered 'necessary' to you then, huh?" he grumbled.

I clenched my jaw. "I can't give a simple answer, Hunter. You know that. There's always a line that cannot be crossed. If we cross it, there won't be any going back. I don't want that to happen to you, Hunter."

The Roman groaned. "Oh gods, your philosophy will be the death of me."

"No torture," I said firmly. "You can hurt the monsters and all to get them to shut up or talk, but no sadism, no carving bloody pictures on monsters, and no dangling monsters up like a fish like what you did to Ms. See. You'll get my support if you promise me you put a stop to this. Got it?"

"What?!" he whined. "B-but I just got my hands on these books on Ancient Chinese torture methods! I want to try out at least three of them!"

I stared at him incredulously. "I don't even want to know how you got those books, Hunter, but my answer is still no."

"What about one? Just one!" he pleaded. He was like a child begging for candy. "Pretty please?"

I sighed. "What is it?"

"Well, you know how Chinese women in the old days practiced foot binding-!"

"Di immortals!" I gasped in horror. I gave Hunter a light smack on the head. "Definitely not! My gods, Hunter, you must be crazy if you think I let you get away with that!"

"But it's not even torture!" Hunter protested. "Women back then even thought it was a beautification!"

"It's considered torture in today's standards!" I retorted. "If you even attempt to force foot binding on some unfortunate soul-!"

"Monsters have no souls."

"—or essence," I said more loudly. Hunter gave a pout. "Don't even think of earning my support for a single moment!"

I gave a light smirk at seeing Hunter's horrified gaze.

"B-but that's not fair!" he argued. "You're taking the fun out of everything!"

"Your definition of fun is highly questionable," I said, sighing. "If you really want my support, Hunter, you got to promise me to get rid of your sadistic nature. Unless…you think my support isn't all that important."

"NO!" Hunter shouted. He even lunged forward and grabbed me by the shoulders, shocking me. "Your support means everything to me, Seth! Of course I think it's important!"

The desperation etched in his face caught me off guard. I think anyone would be freaked out if another you suddenly grabbed you like Hunter did to me. I was wordless for a moment, before doubts of his sincerity surfaced.

"Why do you care?" I said quietly.

Hunter frowned, confused. "What do you mean?"
"Why do you care about what I think? Now that you are capable of obtaining a physical manifestation with or without my consent, there's no need for you to gain my approval."

For a moment, Hunter was silent. He let go of me, thinking, and then he burst out laughing. He just kept on laughing. He laughed for so long that his voice was starting to get hoarse and resemble a hyena.

I secretly swore to myself that I would never be caught laughing like that…ever.

"What is so funny?" I demanded, my face red from embarrassment or anger I wasn't sure. "You're mocking me, aren't you?! I do not believe anything I said could be that h-!"

I broke off when Hunter moved forward and hugged me.

My body (or my mental body?) instantly stiffened at the unfamiliar contact. I felt Hunter wrap his arms around my waist and place his chin against the crook of my shoulder.

"What part of I'm you do you not understand?" he said quietly. "Of course I would care about what you think. We're Seth Hunter. That's all that matters."

"B-but it can't be just that..." I stuttered, mainly because of how unfamiliar I was with the situation. I nearly froze up when he tightened his hold around me.

"Relax, will you?" Hunter muttered against my ear. "You're so tense! Be honest, Seth-do I make you nervous?"

I turned my face away from him. "...Yes."

I heard him let out a detached sigh. "You shouldn't be, Seth. The one person I believe people can fully trust are their selves, but you can't even do that."

I clenched my teeth and lifted my free hands to push him away. "Let go of me."

"Why?" Hunter challenged, not releasing me. "Because I'm right? You always shut yourself down whenever someone said something sensitive, and it appears I'm not an exception."

I didn't say anything. Hunter would know I was lying anyway. This was annoying. It was awkward having another you not let go when you tell them to. I sighed, and with difficulty, I forced myself to loosen up. Hunter felt the change.

"See? Doesn't that feel better?" he said happily much to my irritation. Then, he said more softly, "rely on me more, Seth. Now that I'm here, you don't need to fight alone."

"Are you really my Roman half?" I grumbled. "You're nothing like me. You're so...cheery and childish and...and touchy."

"Hey, you made me this way, and I'm only like this around you." Hunter pointed out. He finally let go of me, and allowed me to lie down against the pillows. "I'm everything you wish and don't wish to be."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It means I'm a manifestation of what you want and don't want to be like. I might be sadistic, but I'm also less stubborn than you are."

I snorted. "Less stubborn, right."
"So," Hunter said a moment later. "Will you let me try that foot-binding-?"

"No."

"Why?!" he said, exasperated. "I even comforted you and made you feel better! This is an injustice!"

I rolled my eyes. "You're such a kid, Hunter."

"You do know that calling me a kid means you're also calling yourself one too…"

"Shut up, Hunter." I muttered, burying a hand under my pillow. "If you give up on that foot binding or whatever crap you read from those books, you have my support."

"Really?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but if you dare to break our agreement…" I narrowed my eyes slightly, giving off my worst glare. "I will show you who the sadistic one is."

My Roman half gave a nervous laugh. "Oh no, of course not! I-I wouldn't dream of it."

"Good."

-o-

"I'm really sorry about what Hunter said to you," I said to the beagle, who sat on my bed. "He was being rude, and he can be a bit hot-headed at times."

I heard that… Hunter muttered inside my mind. I inwardly rolled my eyes and ignored him.

Seth, are you really supporting your other half's actions? Lappy inquired.

"We reached an agreement," I answered, "I got Hunter to promise me to stop his torture methods in exchange for my support."

You spoke with him?

"Yes," I said. "Apparently, I have this mental space in my mind where he and I can talk without interferences. I'm just getting the hang of it, but right now, I can only enter that space when I'm asleep or when Hunter is in control."

I don't like this, Lappy muttered. It's shocking how you and Hunter seem so different. Are you sure you're okay? Did Hunter threaten you into supporting him?

Threaten? Hunter echoed incredulously. How dare he-!

How about you let me talk to him? I thought sternly. Leave the conversation to me.

I heard Hunter give an undignified snort before he vanished into the recesses of my mind. I sighed. This could take some getting used to.

"No, Lappy, Hunter didn't threaten me into supporting him," I said calmly. I sat down beside the beagle. "He was actually very accommodating. Sometimes, he acts so immature that I wonder how he believes what he believes. He confuses me."

How so?
"I don't understand his persona," I said honestly. "You've seen how he's like. He's violent and emotional, but he can also display cold self-restraint. You would think he'd be really aggressive and domineering, but Hunter turned out to be easy-going, even a chill kind of guy when he's around me. He also laughs and smiles more easily than me."

*I'm everything you wish and don't wish to be.*

"I can't label him," I muttered, slightly distressed. "I mean, he's me isn't he? I should be able to know what kind of person Hunter is, but I'm at a loss." I looked at Lappy hopefully. "Maybe you have some ideas?"

*I think a better question would be who you are, Seth.* Lappy said. He lifted a leg to rub his head. *Who are you, Seth? How would you define yourself?*

"I don't know, Lappy," I muttered. "Anything I say would be pretty biased. What do you think I'm like, Lappy? Honestly?"

*I think you're an understanding person,* Lappy said, *I've seen how you interact with your friends and Lucy. You are kind-hearted, you give people chances, and you always think things through before you act on them. You try to give people their own space when they ask, and you are a good listener. You are soft-spoken, but you aren't afraid to speak up when you have to. You're also very polite and respectful to your elders and peers.*

"Thanks, Lappy," I said, smiling briefly, "but what about the bad things? Please tell me. I won't be offended."

*You...you have a hard time looking past your own troubles,* Lappy confessed. I listened intently. *Whether it's about St. Clair's or your prophecy, you tend to block people out from trying to help you. Your stubbornness causes you to do this, and if I must admit, you are kind of judgmental, and your humbleness makes you depressing and less confident. You don't have what it takes to lead. Rather, you are better off on your own or as a follower.*

"Am I?" I murmured quietly, sighing. "I believe you, Lappy. It's not the first time I've heard people say this about me. So that's who I am, huh? What about Hunter? Do you think he's worse...or better than me?"

*I'm going to tell you straight out that I don't like Hunter.* Lappy said. *I prefer you over him, and I'm sure he'll say the same thing about me. What I say about him may be marred by own opinions.*

"That's okay," I assured him, "I want to hear it anyway."

*Hunter told me that he's an extremist,* Lappy said. *I'm only conjecturing, but that can only mean one or two things: one, he is a radical for his beliefs, and two, he represents an 'extreme' version of you.*

"Can you clarify that?"

*I was about to. If you were to place yourself on a scale of one to ten, you would be a five.* Lappy started, *everything that you are and believed yourself to be would be a five—a neutral number.*

"Okay," I said slowly, starting to understand, "and Hunter?"

*He would be a one and a ten. The traits he has in common with you are pushed even higher. Based on what you said about him, the one could represent his immaturity. That would explain why Hunter is so aggressive and violent compared to you. Like a child, he has no control over what he does and needs someone like you to watch him.*
Rely on me more, Seth, Hunter had said. Now that I'm here, you don't have to fight alone.

Watch him? I guessed that could be part of it, but I doubt Hunter saw me as his keeper.

"His intentions are vague," I admitted. "Do you have an idea of what he could possibly want? It can't just be about 'me'."

I can't answer that, Lappy said. You know him better than I do. He might answer you if you ask.

"I could," I said. "What about number ten?"

Number ten is the opposite of number one. Even if Hunter is immature, his actions are not spontaneous. He shares your keen intellect and he is Roman. Romans are more militarized, organized, and typically stricter than Greeks. It takes a lot of analytical planning to set his enemies on traps. You said how he has a cold self-restraint? That likely goes with his Roman personality, but it can also mean Hunter is incapable of compassion and kindness.

I narrowed my eyes, troubled. I still remembered how Katie reacted from her conversation with my other half. Hunter had seemed pretty cold-hearted, but I didn't think he was incapable of kindness. He...he even hugged me. I was sure he knew I didn't like being touched, but he did it anyway. Maybe he did it in order to change my mind-An act of bartering? Or was he genuinely concerned about me?

This was too perplexing.

"You seem to know a lot about the Romans," I said instead. "Have you met them before?"

Yes. In fact, some of Artemis' hunters are Romans.

"What?" I exclaimed. "Who?"

Let's see, I believe Charlotte is a daughter of Ceres, and Elena is a daughter of Mercury.

"Otherwise known as Demeter and Hermes," I said. "I didn't even...I assumed all of them were Greeks."

That's the assumption, Lappy said, the Roman hunters are asked not to reveal their identities whenever they visit Camp Half Blood. It's the same for Thalia and the Greek hunters when they visit areas around the Roman Camp. Artemis' gift of immortality allows their auras to be skewed so their Greek and Roman identities aren't so visible.

"I can't believe I didn't notice this earlier," I muttered. "I thought maybe there's some Roman group of girls or something."

I believe you are talking about the Amazons.

"Whoa, wait—Amazons?" I said incredulously. "You mean like that tribe of female warriors that fought in the Trojan War?" Lappy nodded. "I suddenly feel very clueless."

That's alright, Seth. Besides Walt, I doubt any other demigod has as much knowledge about the Greeks and Romans as you do. The Amazons are like the Hunters, except they are run by their own Queen, but they do respect Lady Diana, and they are mortal. Any girls Artemis encounters who didn't want immortality are usually sent their way. A majority of them are Romans, with some Greek demigods and nymphs. I believe they keep a couple favored males as their pets...
I shivered. "Yeah, I definitely don't want to run into them at all. Do you know where they are?"

"I'm not permitted to say."

"Fine," I said. "Why don't the Hunters and Amazons work together? They are aware of each other, right?"

"Yes, except their rivalry and differences allowed for no collaboration. You can say they are like the Greek and Roman camps."

"That's unfortunate," I muttered. I still didn't get why Greeks and Romans couldn't get along- Just because their culture was different? They're children of the same gods! Some campers may have siblings in the other camp. This was all ridiculous, but I didn't dare say that out loud.

"Be careful around Hunter, Seth. Lappy warned. The way he acts...it's like he treats the world as his playground. If you let him have his way too often, you may end up getting lost to his whims."

"I know," I said. I closed my eyes briefly to think more clearly. "I won't end up like Dr. Jekyll."

"Who's Dr. Jekyll?" Lappy inquired.

"He's a fictional character," I explained. "It's written by Robert Stevenson. Basically, the character Dr. Jekyll had a split personality disorder. On one side, Dr. Jekyll is a respected and amiable doctor, and on the other side, he becomes Mr. Hyde, a dwarfish beast that likes to commit hideous crimes. Hyde is a representation of Dr. Jekyll's sinful desires."

"What happens to the doctor?"

"The story ends with Mr. Hyde winning, and Dr. Jekyll ceased to exist." I mumbled. "But this story is a bit extreme, and I'm sure my situation isn't as awful. I'm not as weak-willed as Dr. Jekyll and Hunter..."

Again, I recalled how my other half had hugged me without permission. Hunter seemed really earnest in gaining my support, but I wasn't ready to trust him yet. The way he got so excited about torture really rubbed me the wrong way. If I somehow offended him, he might turn on me, and that scared me more than anything. His intentions were unclear, and with his kind of personality, I wouldn't be surprised if he had a hidden agenda. Why? It's because that was what I would do if I were in his shoes. I wondered if he resented me for taking control all the time. I stifled a half-hearted laugh. Hunter was right. I couldn't even trust myself, but I didn't want to be cheated again.

"I'll be careful, Lappy," I promised, "I also have you and the others to watch out for me."

"Yes...Lappy agreed. I'll be sure to look out for you, Seth. Due to my ignorance, I wasn't able to tell what was happening to you these last few months. I even avoided talking to you when you may have needed my advice, and I unjustly blamed you, Seth, for torturing Antiphates. I apologize."

"It's all over and done with, Lappy," I said quietly. "You didn't know Hunter was there, and I didn't either. It's hardly your fault, but I appreciate your apology."

I opened my arms up so that Lappy could leap into them. The beagle complied, and I gave a small smile when the dog licked my face. I gently petted him. "Thank you for saving me and Lucy, Lappy. I couldn't have done it without you."

Lappy gave a cheerful bark as the two of us went downstairs to start my training once more.
"Lynetta, how was H-I mean, Seth's training with you today?" Walt asked. He was so used to calling his pupils by their last names, he couldn't help but slip.

"He made improvements," she answered, standing in front of his desk. "Despite his Roman half's appearance, Seth was able to concentrate and do the tasks I assign him with ease."

"What's your opinion on Hunter, Lynetta?" he wondered.

"He…bothers me," Lynetta whispered, slightly disturbed. "Maybe it's because he's Roman and I'm Greek, but his presence is something I have yet to get used to. I don't understand how Seth could stand having another opposing personality be inside him."

"That's something only he knows," Walt said, adjusting one of his shoulders. "But it must be similar to how you first felt about me. You're Greek, and I'm Roman. We ought to be fighting to the death, yet we've worked together for years."

"It takes some getting used to, I get it," she replied. "But Seth and Hunter…I never thought I say his name like that, but even if they're the same person, they still have different personalities. That also means they have a different way of getting things done, as well as different weaknesses."

"You think Hunter will affect Seth's performance?"

Lynetta looked uncertain. "Maybe, but Hunter did mention how he participated in some of the missions. Judging from that, his capabilities and Seth's must be on par, but that can't be guaranteed. I don't know what I can do if Hunter is the one pulling Seth down. Seth is nearly done, and if it weren't for Hunter, Seth would have been ready to take the final test in October."

"You're correct, Lynetta," Walt said. "I would have prepared the final test for him by now, but with Hunter…I don't think I have the time to individually assess him. Not when Seth is expected to serve in the Titan Army soon. I believe there is only one way for us to measure Hunter's prowess."

"Only one way?" Lynetta questioned.

"The quickest way," Walt rephrased. "The test that every Roman has to go through."

She widened her eyes. "You mean…!"

Walt nodded; his expression grim. "I'm going to send Hunter to the Wolf House."

Chapter End Notes

* The reason why I decided to have Hunter see Artemis and Diana as different people relates to how Rick Riordan chose to have Ares and Mars have different opinions on Percy Jackson in the Son of Neptune. Ares hates Percy, but when Mars revealed himself to Percy for the first time, he didn't voice any hatred towards Percy but he only recalled how his other half didn't like him.

A/N: What are your thoughts on Hunter? Which side do you prefer to see more often: Greek or Roman? Thanks for reading!
"So this Wolf House place," I began, and paused in order to swallow down the scrabble eggs I was eating. I wiped my mouth clean with a napkin. "I'm supposed to remain as me?"

It was morning, and it was just me and Walt at the diner table. Lynetta remained outside and out of earshot as Walt prepped me for my upcoming exam. Walt had told Seth to let me complete a test on my own at this Wolf House, and that he would be discussing the details with me in private. After hearing Athena's warning, it didn't take too much convincing for my other half to step aside, but I could tell he was still reluctant about it.

I could still remember every bit of our conversation last night:

"No funny business while I'm out," Seth said sternly, crossing his arms. He was seated on the bed, about to take a nap. "If you even think of committing unnecessary violence-!"

"Yeah, sure," I interrupted, rolling my eyes. "You will know, and I'll have to sit at the time out corner-Gotcha."

Seth frowned. "Do you treat everything like it's a joke?"

I put my hands up. "Of course not, buddy! You know I can be serious if I want to."

Besides, didn't I tell him already? I was only like this around my other half. Others, depending on how close I was to them (which weren't many), would be lucky to see me act like this-the only exceptions being Lucy and the mutt. Lappy was too fun to tease. If I've known how easy it was to push the beagle's buttons, I might have revealed myself sooner.

"You really need an attitude adjustment, Hunter," he sighed, rubbing his temple. "You are already at odds with Lappy, and I certainly do not want you to offend another person."

"HE started it!" I protested. I let out an exasperated sigh. "I only told the truth. It's Lappy's own damn fault for taking it too personally."

"Maybe," he consented, "but that still doesn't excuse your rudeness."

I scoffed, "I will only be polite to those I deem worthy of my courtesy."

"So you don't think I'm worthy?" Seth questioned, curious.

I shook my head, diverting my eyes. "You and Lucy are different. I am...comfortable around you. I don't think I need to be so formal around people I am familiar with, but if you really insist on having me speak more eloquently...?"
"I see," Seth murmured. He sat up straighter. "Fine, you can chose to speak informally around me if that's what you want, but I also believe you need to…read the atmosphere better. You can't just burst out whatever you're thinking and not expect repercussions. You know how the gods get offended easily. Even if we don't like a couple of them, we can't risk it. We already got one goddess to deal with. Let's not increase that number."

Since you put it that way…

"I see your point," I agreed. "So you want me to stay under the radar? I can do that."

"Just…just promise me you won't do anything drastic," Seth muttered, his eyes not reaching mine. "I don't want to suddenly wake up and see everyone glaring at me for something you did."

Ouch.

Instead of being offended, I decided to reassure him. "Quit worrying, Seth. I'll behave. It's not like we'll be facing any real enemies."

Seth only stared at me, his eyes scanning my face for any hints of dishonesty. I only smiled in return. If he thought he could get anything out of me this way, he's got another one coming. Between the two of us, I've always been the better actor.

"You just sit tight, and let me handle it for once," I said with a grin. "Feel free to watch if you want. Maybe you'll learn something from me."

Seth rolled his eyes. "Oh, I will, Hunter. You don't need to tell me."

"That's correct," Walt answered, snapping me to attention, "you are to remain Roman at all times. This is more of a precaution than for getting an accurate measurement of your abilities. The Wolf House is sacred Roman ground. Revealing your Greek ancestry could trigger unwanted danger."

"Okay, and what am I supposed to expect when I get there?" I asked. "You mentioned something about the wolf goddess, Lupa. Is she responsible for testing me?"

"That's right," he said, "I've encountered her and her pups when I was only a kid. Based on what I've heard from others, Lupa alters the test to suit each Roman's capabilities, which is why I can't give you any specifics. One thing I can advise is that you must prove your worth quickly. Lupa shuns weakness, and if she senses your fear, she won't hesitate to turn you into dog food."

Dog food, huh? I would like to see her try. I thought. I always loved a good challenge, they made life more interesting, and Lupa wouldn't be called the surrogate mother of Rome if she was soft. My hands started fidgeting under the table, impatiently waiting for my meeting with Lupa. Now that Seth has given me full reign, this could be my chance to go all out without holding back.

"How soon do I leave?" I asked.

"I've already notified Lord Mercury to tell Lupa about you," he answered. "He should be arriving later today. Lord Mercury will be the one to take you to the Wolf House, and he will be the one to bring you back if you should succeed."

I grinned, leaning back on my chair some more to stretch. "Sounds good to me, Walt. What weapons should I bring with me? Any other regulations I need to be aware of?"

"Bring whatever you believe necessary," he muttered. He placed his elbows on the table, clasped his hands together, and placed his chin on his hands. "As for rules, Lupa will be the one to inform you."
"I see," I said. "Is that all?"

The son of Vulcan nodded, "you may leave, Hunter."

I got up, and pushed in my chair before leaving the room. I flexed my arms as I walked upstairs to my bedroom. As I opened the door, I noticed Lappy watching me intently on my bed.

I ignored the mutt and walked towards my desk. Nightwalker and Darkhacker were there, as well as my guns, bow, and quiver. I also had an assault and sniper rifle leaning against the side of the table. There were celestial bronze bullets dangling by the shelf’s edge. I looked over my selection of weapons before I decided to grab my daggers and placed them around my person. I opened up one of three drawers on the side, and pulled out a small steel pocket knife. I flicked it open, and played around with it to exercise my wrist and fingers.

Lappy was watching me play with my knife cautiously. When I noticed his stare, an amusing idea crossed my mind. I smirked lightly before I suddenly twisted my body to face him, and threw the knife swiftly. Predictably, the beagle backed up in alarm, but just before the knife scratched the top of his head, I willed the knife to vanish and reappear in my outstretched hand.

Take notes, Seth. This is how you use Nemesis' gift to its full potential, I thought. So far, my other half only knew how to bring objects to him, but didn’t know how to return them. I figured out that little tidbit when I reviewed Nemesis’ instructions again. If all we needed to do was envision where the object was located to bring it to us, then surely, we can visualize an accurate place we want to place them too.

"Why are you so scared, Lappy?" I asked with a smile, flicking the knife back out. "It's just a pocket-knife used to defend against mortals. I was never going to hurt you. Seth wouldn't like that."

That's no prank, Lappy growled. His light brown eyes started to have a reddish glint to them. That was a death threat, wasn't it?

My smile vanished. Seth wanted me to be serious, didn't he? I'll show him how serious I can be.

"You catch on pretty quick," I said. I twirled the pocket knife with my fingers once more before I allowed it to disappear back into the drawer. I pulled out my chair and sat down in front of Lappy, my right knuckles pressed against my chin lightly. "Consider what I did to be your first and only warning."

For what reason?

"You tried to turn Seth against me," I hissed. "I heard your conversation. Seth tried to cover parts of it, but I've explored the recesses of our mind far more extensively than he ever would. There is nothing Seth can hide from me."

I told him to be careful around you, Lappy snarled back. A personality like yours is too volatile and dangerous to be left unchecked.

"You think...I have ill intentions towards him." I said icily. Mentally, I was pissed. This was the most offensive thing anyone could say to me. "Were you not listening when I had that chat with Artemis, dog? Were you shutting my words out when I spoke to you for the first time? I would never harm Seth intentionally!"

Of course I know that, Lappy said snidely. Seth is you. You can't hurt Seth without hurting yourself in the process. I've seen your kind before. People like you only care about themselves. Seth just happens to be part of that equation.
I narrowed my eyes, spotting the taunt hidden in the beagle's words. He was trying to rile me up, trying to make me lose my cool and spill the beans. It was plain as day that Lappy wanted to know what I wanted with my other half, but I wasn't about to reveal them to the dog. I also didn't want Seth to know about them. Not yet.

"Your narrow mindedness continues to astound me," I retorted. "All you need to know is that Seth will be safe with me. You can chose to believe it or not. I can care less about what you think."

I got up from my chair, and grabbed a jacket from my closet. I glared at the beagle balefully. "Heed my warning, dog. Otherwise, I have other tactics I can use to make Seth pay for your actions."

Lappy's shot his head up so fast it was almost comical. Leave Seth out of this! Or else I'll-!

"Or you'll what?" I interrupted. "Hurt me? This body is Seth's body too. You hurt me, you also hurt him, and I do recall you telling Seth that you would...be there for him." I gave a mocking laugh. "Are you breaking that promise?"

"I will find a way to deal with you, Lappy promised.

"Oh, I'm sure," I said sarcastically. "Until then you'll have to deal with me. So why don't you be a good dog, and stay put."

I slammed the door shut behind me as I walked out, locking Lappy the beagle in. I knew that the only way Lappy could get out would be to change into his true form, but I knew he wouldn't do that. He would end up damaging Walt's house, and we all knew how sensitive Walt was about his things. Even if he had the money to pay for renovations, Walt valued his privacy more than anything. Or, if he tried to fix it himself, it would be time wasted. Lappy was too courteous to evoke Walt's ire. Just like Seth.

"That answers that question," I muttered to myself as I went downstairs. Lappy didn't believe my claim of keeping Seth safe at all. The way he shot his head up so fast...he didn't even realize that my so called threat was a glaring contradiction of what I said earlier. How typical of him.

I played some Assassin's Creed to pass the time. I needed to rest up so I could save my strength for the test. Eventually, Lord Mercury showed up to take me to the Wolf House. When I greeted him at the door, I noticed the stark changes between Mercury and Hermes. From Seth's perspective, Hermes usually had a mischievous glint in his eye, and his choice of apparel was more relaxed and casual. Mercury, however, had a more stern countenance, like he didn't know the meaning of a joke, the funny kind anyway. He held his caduceus like it was a lethal spear, a weapon to be reckoned with. I had no doubts he could if he wanted to. He was also wearing a vest with a black tie tucked in, and there was a pair of rimless glasses perched on his face. Mercury could be mistaken as a businessman in his late twenties.

George and Martha slithered back and forth, watching me carefully with gold eyes. Every few seconds, one of them would give off a hiss, like they were trying to detect my fear. Not once did they speak. It was like they knew how important this meeting was. Their master was about to take me to the most sacred place for Romans. It seemed like the snakes also had a Roman and Greek side to them.

I bowed with a fist over my heart. "Lord Mercury."

"Hello, Hunter," Mercury greeted, "I see you are ready?"

"Of course," I stated. "Your time is precious, my Lord. I do not dare waste it."
He lifted a hand towards me and I grasped it firmly. I felt the god's aura begin to grow more vibrant, his whole figure started to glow, and I shut my eyes tightly to avoid seeing Mercury's true form. My right hand felt like it was being pressed against a massager. The air in my lungs threatened to seep out if I hadn't kept my mouth shut. Teleporting was like traveling through a vacuum at supersonic speeds. My body felt cramped, everything was pushing against me. I felt locked in place. When I finally could breathe properly again, I knew that we had arrived.

The sky was dim, and there was an aroma of fresh pine and cedar. My feet were standing on smooth soil, and a soft chilly breeze swept by me. Lord Mercury released his hold on me. The two of us were standing before a gray stone dwelling with towers. There was a small wooden fence around it, and it was quiet for the most part. I could hear the birds chirping within the nearby wood. There was a lot of moss on the roots of nearby trees. The house looked beautiful, but I could tell the house was incomplete. There were still some freestanding structures that lacked the glass windows and tiled roof.

*So this was Jack London's dream house, I thought, and if I recall correctly, the text also said that Jack London was a son of Mercury. I wonder what Mercury is thinking now. He must realize that this house may have played a role in his son's untimely demise.*

I snuck a peek at the god standing beside me. Lord Mercury had a clenched jaw, his eyes narrowed. He looked like he was glaring at the house, like if he stared hard enough, the house would burst into flames yet again. I drew a questionable look: Did Mercury still mourn for his deceased son?

Mercury cleared his throat abruptly, and looked away from the house to face me. "I must get going. I wish you the best of luck, Hunter, but I'm sure you won't need it. I've witnessed your talents, and I'm certain Lupa will approve of you. I'll be here when you finish."

I blinked, surprised by the encouragement. "Thank you, Lord Mercury."

He scrutinized me some more before he gave a curt nod. I looked away as the Roman god disappeared out of sight. The house appeared even more daunting up close, and I've yet to encounter Lupa or any sign of life. My hands lingered to my daggers by instinct as I walked past the wooden fence and up a set of stairs before going into a stone tunnel.

From my observations outside, I should be approaching an empty field surrounded by arched columns, but that was not the case. The tunnel seemed longer than usual, and when I finally walked out of it, there was a large metallic platform. I was inside a domed room. There were four arched entries around me, and the room was lit by torches. I had entered into a non-tangible space.

*Not bad. I thought amusingly. It's like Narnia.*

I heard clawing and growling noises, and finally, I saw a couple dark gray wolves walk out of one of the dark passageways. They circled around me, watching me with their dark sentient eyes. Some of them bared their saliva coated fangs at me. Each of them was about a meter long and three feet tall—small compared to Lappy, but they had the advantage in numbers. I saw more of them come out of the other entrances, blocking any escape. I stood where I was, and held my head up high. I remembered Walt's warnings- I will not let them sense my fear.

Suddenly, there was loud, penetrating voice in my mind.

*Who dares to enter my realm? An authoritative voice, unmistakably female, demanded. State your identity and intentions or risk being devoured by my offspring.*
"I am Hunter, heir of Diana," I proclaimed without hesitation. "I seek the approval of the wolf goddess, Lupa, the surrogate mother of Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome."

Hunter, the voice, Lupa's, murmured thoughtfully. I see. You are the one Mercury and Forger informed me of. You wish to gain my approval? Then allow me to see you for what you are!

The wolves around me backed away into the far corners of the room. I saw a tall figure emerge from the shadows of the entrance in front of me. The first thing I noticed was her eyes. They were silver like mine, and even her fur almost matched my hair color, only lighter. Before me, was a wolf that stood at least seven feet tall, even taller than Lappy. The goddess' silver eyes were unblinking as she walked around me slowly, analyzing me. I kept my eyes still, not daring to let them wander to where the wolf was. Lupa might interpret that as a sign of unease. The other wolves were silent as Lupa walked forward and stared straight into my eyes.

It was hard not to flinch. Lupa was massive, and when she opened her mouth, I saw rows of sharp fangs that made Lappy's pale in comparison. She was so close, that she could devour me in one bite if she so desired. I felt sweat starting to run down the back of my neck as I felt the goddess begin to probe my mind relentlessly. She was trying to determine my character by looking into my memories. She wanted to see what my inspirations were… as well as my fears.

With difficulty, I kept myself open. If I hid anything, Lupa might misunderstand my intentions. After what seemed to be hours, Lupa drew her head back, allowing me to breathe more easily.

You've had your share of battles, Lupa said at last. You are a veteran who has experienced loss and betrayal. You understand your fatal flaw, and you are driven by your thirst for vengeance. You claim that you are the heir of Diana, yet you are also Seth, heir of Artemis.

I felt my body stiffen.

Lupa gave me a stern gaze. I wondered why you only gave me one name when the present era demands two. When I asked for your identity, I meant it. Why did you not give me your full name? Did you presume to believe you can hide your Greek lineage from me?

"You are a Roman goddess," I said with slight difficulty. "I was warned that this place is sacred for Romans. I did not wish to offend you."

So you tried to cover the truth from me. Lupa concluded.

"I did not try to cover it," I explained. "I am Roman right now. Seth is my other half, but he isn't presented before you now. If I introduced myself as Seth Hunter, then that would be a lie because I am currently not Roman and Greek."

Interesting, she said. I see you have a way with words. That silver tongue of yours will prove useful in your future. Very well, Hunter, I will accept your excuse.

I allowed myself to relax a little, relieved. Was that a test just now?

You're experienced, and your thirst for vengeance is what motivates you to become stronger. Lupa assessed. She appeared thoughtful. You even got Invidia as your patron. Impressive, Hunter-Invidia is well known to be very picky and intolerant towards demigods.

I swallowed hesitantly before I replied, "Thank you, Lady Lupa."

Don't thank me yet, she said narrowly. Invidia may see potential in you, but I've yet to witness your strength, which will change NOW.
Around me, the wolves started growling and if my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, their numbers have quadrupled. Every square inch of this room was occupied with wolves. The flames in the torches flickered briefly, allowing me to see the reddish glow in the wolves' eyes. They looked murderous…and hungry. The ones closest to me had their mouths open widely, and my sharp eyesight noticed pieces of flesh stuck to their gums.

She won't hesitate to turn you into dog food.

I swallowed uncomfortably. Walt wasn't bluffing; there probably were some demigods that didn't pass Lupa's test, and got devoured as a result. I made a resolve not to become one of them.

Lupa asked, can you count how many of my kin you see here, Hunter?

"I can, but it will take a while," I said honestly. "There's too many of them."

Exactly, Lupa said. They are many, and they answer only to me. Each of them are strong on their own, but together, they cannot be defeated by traditional means. Your test, Hunter, is to find their weakness. I'll be judging your prowess. If you can incapacitate all of them for even one bare moment, then I shall adopt you as one of my own. Should you fail…well, I'm sure you're aware what happens.

I recalled the image of flesh stuck to some of the wolves' mouths. I bit the inside of my lip in order to appear less squeamish. So all I had to do was put down all of these wolves. That sounded straightforward enough, which got me thinking: was there a catch?

"Alright," I replied. "Are there any rules I need to abide, Lady Lupa? What if I kill one of your kin by accident?"

You don't need to worry about that, Lupa answered. If any of my kin were to die, then they don't deserve to be associated with me. As for rules…you are prohibited from stopping until you pass my test. Use whatever methods you need to pass.

I tilted my head down slightly. "Very well, I hope that my performance will be to your standard."

Yes, she agreed, for your sake, you better hope it is. Until then, Hunter.

The she-wolf turned her gaze, and started to walk back the way she came. Once her figure disappeared into the shadows and her aura was no longer detectable, the wolves around me started snarling. They were poised to attack. My hands lingered towards my Stygian Iron daggers, and a grin emerged as I glanced at each of the wolves in the crowd.

This was going to be one heck of a work out.

"So," I started casually, brandishing the weapons into my hands. "Who wants to go first?"

I heard scuffling from behind, and blindly slashed the wolf that had attempted to attack me. The wolf collapsed to the ground, a long diagonal slash now sported on its chest. It was still alive, but its breathing has become raspy and irregular. When the first wolf fell, it prompted a chain reaction. The other wolves grew agitated, and many took it as a sign to strike.

I started slashing and kicking away any mutt that came too close. Some of them jumped high, their teeth baring against my head before I narrowly swerved their attacks and kicked them hard as they passed. Soon, I was being assaulted from all sides. I elbowed one of the wolves' face while slashing open another's abdomen in midair. My arms and legs sported cuts and bite marks. Since they were only minor scraps, they healed quickly, but my body couldn't rejuvenate the amount of blood lost.
My eyes were starting to grow weary, and my arms and legs started to groan under the continuous stress.

I didn't know how long I kept fighting like this. It was hard to keep track of time when the next second could mean your death. Eventually, when I was able to catch a few precious seconds to breathe, I noticed something amiss.

I scanned my surroundings quickly. There were no bodies lying around. All of the wolves that I had previously incapacitated were already up and moving. I knew there were many, but there's got to be a limit. Could it be that these wolves healed as fast as I could?

*Each of them are strong on their own, Lupa had said, but together, they cannot be defeated by traditional means.*

I gritted my teeth, wincing when I received a new gash on my leg. So that's what Lupa meant. If I continued to attack these wolves this way…I would never be able to defeat all of them at once. They would keep getting up again and again, their energy renewed while mine slowly drained out. I was gaining more injuries, and their movements were getting faster and stronger…or was I getting slower?

To test out this theory, I placed my daggers back into their holsters, and summoned my silver knives before I elongated their blades at will, creating swords. The wolves seemed to pause at the sight of my new weapons, and I took that opportunity to slash a wolf fatally across the neck.

The other wolves backed away for a bit. I was finally able to catch my breath as I fixed my eyes on the fallen wolf. There was a stream of blood trailing down its fur and onto the floor, creating a large red puddle. I narrowed my eyes even more when I sensed the wolves' auras starting to almost mingle together, creating one entity and placing their combined aura into their injured kin. The bleeding stopped, and I took a cautious step back when the wolf slowly got back up again. The injury I inflicted had disappeared.

My theory was confirmed. That sucked. I was hoping to have some fun with Lupa's test, but I didn't want it to be *pointless* fun. That got tiring real fast. Oh well, I guessed I'd have to concentrate more.

*I need a new plan, I thought, one that will allow me to put down all of these wolves simultaneously. For as long as one wolf remains standing, the others will get back up. I'll need to use archery, and be able to see all of them, but this place is too enclosed…*

First, I needed to get out of here. Find another place that had more open space, preferably outside. The wolves moved as one pack, and I found myself being pushed into a corner. I held my swords steady, and noticed the dark tunnel Lupa had entered and left from. It was the only exit that remained unblocked. I didn't know where that tunnel led: It could be a dead end, or, it might provide me the way to a more suitable arena. Either way, it was a gamble I had to take because I would be dead if I remained where I was.

With that new plan in mind, I backed up a little with bent knees before I ran as fast as I could and leaped high into the air. I twisted my body while willing the swords to vanish, and my feet crashed against one wolf's head briefly before pushing my foot down on another. I maneuvered my way through the bustling crowd, using the wolves as my stepping stones. My feet eventually touched bare ground, and without a moment of doubt, I went into the tunnel.

The path was smoothed with dirt, and the walls were made with the same rough stone texture. I kept running, and I could tell the wolves were trying to gain on me. My legs protested against the movement at first before my regeneration swept in and took care of it. I pushed myself even harder,
running faster, and thankfully, my eyes saw the tunnel open up and the sweet aroma of fresh air was heavenly.

It was a garden. There was a large rectangular pool with minimal water, and there were statues of classical deities positioned next to it like pillars. Some of them served as fountains, and wild flowers and weeds were everywhere among the untamed grass. There were also splintered pillars and column drums scattered, and a broken pediment covered with moss. The scene looked like it was taken out of this Roman architecture book the blonde Athena girl had shown my other half once. I recalled that the book was focused on Pompeii. I guessed that explained the dreariness.

I dashed past the statues, and kept going. Soon, I was climbing up a hill, and there were jagged pieces of marble and stone protruding out of it, slowing me down. I glanced behind me, and noticed that the wolves had come out of the semi-submerged tunnel and were looking for me. I quickened my pace until I finally stood at the edge of the cliff, a large roundish peak that overlooked the garden and the fields beyond. Dark clouds have appeared in the sky. It was already night.

I hope you're watching, Seth, I thought with a smirk, you wouldn't want to miss this one. Let's see if I could pull it off.

I crouched down on one knee. I closed my eyes briefly to visualize my bow, and once I felt the familiar weapon in my left hand, I quickly strung a couple arrows and fired. The wolves finally noticed where I was, but it didn't matter. I wasn't aiming at them. Instead, I hit the surrounding pillars with large bursts of silver light. The pillars fell and from above, I saw that I have forcefully enclosed all the wolves together, like a cage.

Now that I was sure none of the wolves would escape, I could finally enact my plan.

I concentrated and poured in my own energy into the silver bow, making it larger and sturdier. My bare skin gave off a silver glow as wisps of my energy swept into my weapon. By the time I was done, the bow became as tall as I am. I felt sweat running down my forehead as I drew the string back, my bow held sideways, and directed the tip of my arrow downward. The thin, wispy arrow started to fizzle with the energy I was pouring in, but instead of growing larger, the arrow began to split continuously at the tip. The arrows were connected together at the ends, making it easier for me to grasp. Each of my arrows, when supplied with enough energy, had enough power to cut down a massive tree.

I freed my arrow.

The wolves didn't stand a chance.

Once I released my arrow, my bow dissipated and my body lunged forward. My body felt drained yet lively. I saw my arrow split into smaller ones, and for a moment, I couldn't believe how beautiful they were. From here, my arrows appeared like small falling sparks of light, a shower of silver rain...

A second later, that shower became a rupture of explosions. I was forced to back away, or else my face would have been tarnished from the sparks of ignited flame. I relished the sound of my opponents' agonizing wails as I lied down on my back in the grass. I placed my hands behind my head and sighed contently, but my body felt numb. I looked up at the dark sky and saw stars. I also saw The Huntress, reminding me of the Hunt's previous lieutenant's noble sacrifice nearly a year ago.

Hello, Zoë Nightshade. How are you doing up there?

Predictably, the constellation remained unresponsive.
I smiled, and chuckled at myself. Oh, Zoë. I wonder what you would have thought of me. It's too bad I'll never meet you in person. Just as well. If you thought Seth was the most annoying male you ever met, I'd probably mark him second on your list easily. According to what Seth tells me anyway.

Speaking of Seth, he's been too quiet. He told me that he'd be watching me, but he has yet to say a word. Was something wrong?

*Hey, Seth!* I called. *You in there? Don't tell me you fell asleep! Man, if you made me waste all my efforts of entertaining you, then that's just downright uncool. AND RUDE! You hear? You don't like being rude, right Mr. Manners? Come on, Seth, answer me-*!

At last, Seth decided to grace me with a response. *Really, Hunter? Mr. Manners? That's crappy.*

I snorted. *Of all the things I said to get your attention, you respond to that? I'm so-o amazed.*

*I dislike nicknames.*

Well you better get used to them, Seth, 'cause I got plenty where that came from.

If Seth was in control, he would have rolled his eyes. *Anyway, Hunter, did you really have to go overboard? Twenty arrows would have sufficed, but no, you just had to go out with a bang!*

"What can I say?" I said, cheeky. "We got to make sure that our opponents are gone for good. If you leave them with even an ounce of hope, then they will come crawling back to bite you in the ass. Prevention measures, you know?"

I heard Seth give a sigh, probably shaking his head. *I suppose, but try to conserve our strength better. With the way you are now, even the most pathetic monster can finish you off.*

"Don't underestimate me," I smirked, "I still got a few tricks up my sleeve, and I would never leave us vulnerable for a single moment. I'll take good care of our body, okay?"

*Sure.* Seth didn't sound convinced. Then again, I did exhaust our body's energy just now. I'd make sure to do better next time.

*Why were you so quiet?* I wondered. *Why didn't you say anything? You're welcomed to add your input.*

*I...thought that I would distract you, Seth muttered. I didn't think you'd be able to think straight with me sprouting out comments all the time. I was fine with watching.*

I blinked in surprise before a smile emerged once more. *Aw, Seth, I didn't know you could be this considerate. No wonder Apollo called you adorable-*!

*Shush it.* He sounded embarrassed. Was it wrong for me to think that my other half was so endearing? Would that make me a narcissist? I cringed at the thought.

*I don't care when you decide to talk to me,* I told him. *If you want to suggest a plan, or comment on my awesome skills, or if you want to talk about the weather, it's alright with me. Of course, if you think I'm distracting you when you fight...*

*N-no, it's fine,* Seth stammered before clearing his 'throat'. *I just...how are you so easy-going about all this? Don't you think it's, I don't know, distracting to hear yourself talk back?*

I shrugged, "I've been in the back of our brain for years. I hear myself (you) talk back all the time. It's
not much different now. I've grown used to it."

Oh.

I felt Lupa's aura crept up behind me, and I lifted my chin up. My eyes spotted her paws. I sat up quickly, and took my time to stand. My legs were wobbly. I hoped Lupa didn't notice.

To mask my unease, I gave a hesitant bow. "Lady Lupa."

Hunter, Lupa replied, if I had known you would end up destroying one of my sacred gardens, I would have locked you in with my kin.

I swallowed deeply, "I...apologize if I offended you. I'll be sure to compensate the damages."

It doesn't matter, Lupa dismissed. It was already destroyed many times before, just not at that magnitude. How did you accomplish such a feat?

"Are you talking about my attack earlier or...?"

Lupa nodded.

"I can manipulate celestial silver," I informed her. "Artemis gave Seth and me the ability to summon the weapons she grants her hunters. It was only recently that Seth learned to change the weapons' forms by means of applying energy and creativity. I merely watched and practiced it on my own, as well as add in a touch of originality."

Seth could only summon up to a maximum of ten arrows. Holding that many arrows at once caused unnecessary strain on his fingers and wrist. Since the celestial silver was able to respond to what I commanded it to do, then all I had to do was make the arrows merge at the end, and remember to separate them when I fired. The number of arrows I released was dependent on the amount of energy I applied.

Lupa's face was indiscernible as she stared at me, her analytical silver eyes caused me to fidget with my fingers behind my back. Then, she drew her head back and laughed, startling me. I didn't know whether I should laugh along or be offended.

Mercury told me that you'd be a special one, Lupa said. I knew you were in your own category, but it's only now that I understand the significance. You and those demigods never fail to amuse me.

I relaxed a little after sensing her good mood. It gave me enough boldness to ask, "Did I pass your test?"

Yes, you did, Lupa answered, you've proven your worth to me, Hunter. I shall gladly adopt you as one of my children, and pronounce you a true Roman of the Legion.

She stepped forward, and gave my face a sloppy lick. I blinked rapidly to get the saliva out of my eyes. While I tried to wipe my face with my sleeve, Lupa had walked past me to look down from the cliff. That was when I remembered what I had done to her kin.

You obliterated them, Lupa stated blandly. I gave a hesitant nod. Was it too much? Maybe I should have listened to Seth and held back a little.

Before I could say anything, Lupa closed her eyes and I could sense her aura seeping out and going straight down to the mangled bodies beneath. I heard soft whimpering and barking, and I knew instantly that Lupa had somehow revived them. It must be one of her abilities as the wolf goddess.
Typically, when a demigod passes my test, I would have them stay with me for a couple more days to learn the Roman lifestyle, she said, facing me. You aren't typical. Forger has already taught you the basics, and you are no rookie. I also approve your kind of personality. There is nothing I need to teach you here, but you still have room for improvement.

"I don't understand," I said, "you said you didn't have anything to teach me. Shouldn't that mean I don't need any improvement?"

_I said I couldn't teach you HERE._ Lupa pointed out. _If you want to achieve your best, then you'll have to venture outside and pursue that strength. The strength you lack lies within the Legion._

"The Legion," I whispered. I was starting to get excited. "You want to send me to the Roman camp."

Lupa nodded. _Yes, except you're not fully Roman. The Olympians may try to stop you from upholding my verdict. If you're lucky, then maybe they'll allow you to stay for a short while._

"I am expected to meet Lord Mercury afterwards," I said, thinking. "I'll ask him." It was better to ask rather than go behind the gods' back. I didn't want to get incinerated this early in the game.

Moments later, I followed Lupa out of the Wolf House. The sky has started to brighten up, which meant that a whole day has already past. I walked out of the stone corridor alone after Lupa bid me farewell. Lord Mercury was standing aloof in the middle of the woods. He sure was punctual.

"You past her test," Mercury stated with crossed arms. I nodded. "And did Lupa, perhaps, order you to visit Camp Jupiter?"

"Camp Jupiter…?" I was confused before I realized that was the Roman camp's name. "Oh, right. The Roman camp. Yeah, she…did."

"Figures," he muttered. He twirled his caduceus in one hand. "Do you wish to see the Romans, Hunter?"

I nodded eagerly. "Of course! I've always wanted to see how they are like, and how different they are from the Greeks. I will love to meet them."

I also didn't want to always be the oddball out. Every demigod I knew of besides Walt was Greek, and Walt was my mentor and senior. I couldn't hold a casual conversation with him like how I did with Katie Gardner; our age difference prevented us from doing so. Seth had friends in Camp Half-Blood, but they were technically _his_ friends, not mine. He was the one spending time with them while I observed. I wanted to be able to meet Roman demigods my age and interact with them directly for once. Mercury may be the key to fulfilling that wish.

When Mercury appeared skeptical in allowing me to visit, I pressed a bit further, "Look, I'm already aware of Camp Half-Blood, and you don't see me blabbering my mouth. I'm sure my other half will keep quiet about Camp Jupiter. I'll make sure to uphold this secrecy thing."

"Or you can block your memories from him," Mercury suggested.

I shook my head immediately, "Sorry, my Lord. I can't do that."

"Even at the cost of not going to the Camp?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "I don't want to withhold any secrets from Seth and cause him pain. I promised Lady Artemis that. I'm not going to break it just so I can enjoy myself."
Mercury appeared sympathetic. "I see, so you already made a deal with Artemis. Alright, Hunter. I suppose I could allow you to stay at the Camp for a day or two."

"Really?"

"But you must promise me that you won't do anything drastic," Mercury ordered. "Don't stand out. I'm really sticking my neck out for you on this. The other Olympians won't be as lenient as I am."

I nodded quickly, "I understand, sir."

I reminded myself to give Mercury a substantial offering later.

Mercury lifted a hand, and I reached for it. I closed my eyes and smiled as the god of travelers started to glow…

I couldn't wait to meet them all. The Romans better live up to their reputation.

-o-

Chapter End Notes

*Jack London was the author of 'The Call of the Wild' and he was the owner of the Wolf House. In the PJO universe, he was a son of Mercury who died shortly after his house caught on fire.

Finally done! This chapter took a lot of my imagination to write since Riordan barely went into depth about the Wolf House. Anyway, leave your thoughts, comments, and predictions in your review! Thanks for reading!
Meetings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sight of the camp left me in awe.

The camp was beautiful. There was a valley stretched before me with small hills, basins, and lakes that gleamed in the sunlight. There were forests with oak, eucalyptus, and fig trees. Their gardens resembled the ones I saw at the Wolf House, only they weren't in ruins. There were pools and cisterns lined up with marble columns with gold lining in its capital. The buildings were grand, rich, and had red tiled roofs. There were also some honorary statues, and domes that mimicked the Pantheon in Rome. Many of the temples were laid out on one hill, and the streets were paved with stone and granite.

I recalled Annabeth telling Seth how Romans were considered the best architects, even better than the Greeks due to their methods of using concrete to create curved surfaces. Now I saw why the girl had been so intent on reading every book she could get on Roman architecture.

I knew then, that a day or two here wouldn't be enough for me.

Before I even opened my mouth, Mercury already knew what I was going to say.

"No, Hunter," he said sternly. "I cannot let you stay any longer than what we agreed."

"Oh come on!" I argued. "Two days is hardly enough for sightseeing, much less finding out what Lupa wants me to learn here!"

The god was obstinate. "No means no, Hunter. I cannot allow the Romans to find out about you. The longer you stay here, the more likely they are to discover your other identity."

"How about this?" I said, mentally scrambling to come up with an alternative. "You said you are worried about the Romans finding out about Seth, right?" Mercury only stared at me. "How about I give them an alias?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Go on."

"I'll give them a fake name, as well as keep my heritage a secret," I said. "I can say that I'm a child of Apollo instead. I already got the archery down, as well as the music and literature stuff. If I said that I was an heir of Diana, then that would attract unnecessary attention. You see what I mean?"

"And just how are you supposed to prove this?" he questioned. "Camp Jupiter also mark their inhabitants by their parentage. Your pretense will be discovered, and the Romans are well known for their corporeal punishments."

I swallowed uneasily. "You can help me. You can inform Diana not to claim me again, and if you really want to go overboard, maybe you can tell Lord Apollo my plan and convince him to play along for a short while."

"It's not that easy," Mercury replied. "We aren't allowed to 'pretend' to be another demigod's parent. That act is forbidden."

"But you didn't say I can't pretend to be another god's kid," I pointed out, "and you can still prevent
Diana from claiming me." When I noticed Mercury's frown, I tried to reassure him. "Look, I'm already really, really thankful to you for allowing me to be here, but this is my one chance to see others like me. If this divide between Greeks and Romans continues on for centuries more, then this visit would be my first and last."

"Once is more than enough to create trouble."

"Everything I do here will be my responsibility, my Lord," I said sternly. "If you're worried about me getting you into trouble, don't be—I won't risk sullying your reputation. If I do, then I'll accept whatever punishment you wish to give me. You…trusted me enough to let me stay for two days. I'm only asking for a little more time."

The god was silent for a while, pondering through my words. I clenched my hands to ease my nerves, until Mercury shook his head and let out a sigh.

"You drive a hard bargain, Hunter."

"I'll be sure to give you another substantial offering like last time?" I added. "Another bonus."

Mercury gave a slight smile. "Food offerings are nice. I did enjoy the homemade pasta and pot pies."

"I'll be sure to make double the amount," I promised, "as well as add in my special whip cream cakes."

"Really?" He placed a hand to his chin, thoughtful. "Fine, I'll extend the visit to three days."

This time, it was my turn to frown. "Three? No, I want at least seven!"

"That's too long. I'll settle for four."

"Six!" I wagered. "That's how long I took making your offering last time! I'll probably take longer next time around!"

The god looked irritated, likely offended by my pestering, but I wasn't one to back down.

"Five days," Mercury said at last, reluctant. "Take it…or leave it."

I grinned. "Five days."

We were standing by a riverbank, and once we ended our negotiations, the god quickly guided me towards one of the main gates, where dozens of Roman demigods dressed in purple shirts and armor soon took note of my arrival. A couple of them gave me suspicious stares, but their attention were soon focused on the transformed seven foot Roman god beside me.

The Romans started to whisper, and I crossed my arms and fought the urge to pull up my hoodie. Like Seth, I hate audiences and unwanted stares, but I hate gossipy audiences even more. I mean, hello? I was standing right there, hearing every single thing they said. Did they think I was deaf? Or were they purposely trying to get on my nerves? What a great welcome.

They're curious about you, my other half said dryly. You're just being sensitive.

Oh hey, Seth, I greeted. So you finally decided to talk to me without any prompting.

I'm getting used to it, he admitted.

So you think their gawking is a sign of their curiosity? I questioned.
Uh huh. Think about it: you do have a Roman god right beside you.

Point taken.

Some of the Romans in the back ran when they saw me and Mercury. Were they going to notify someone of our arrival? Few seconds later, my observation was confirmed when the Romans parted ways as two purple-cloaked individuals approached.

One of them was a tall blonde male whose countenance seemed…rough. His blue eyes were dark and stern, and he had a distinct cut on his lip. He was well-built, and his short blond hair fell down in waves in the front. He had a sword hanging beside his left thigh, which meant he was a right-handed swordsman. I suppose he was good-looking, but personally, I thought he looked too stiff. He looked like the type to take his job seriously with little questions asked, kind of like Seth I guess. Under different circumstances, I bet the two of them would get along great.

Gee, you really think so? Seth muttered sarcastically.

Birds of a feather flock together.

You just met him. How would you know how he's like?

Intuition.

Sure, he murmured before he decided to stop talking again.

The one beside him was a dark-haired girl that looked to be around my age, maybe younger. Like the guy, she also wore a purple cloak around her armor, except her armor was decorated with more medallions, likely to commemorate her victories. She carried herself proudly, and stared down any who dared to challenge her leadership. Her face was stern and suspicious as she glanced my way, her dark eyes scrutinizing me quietly.

Judging from how the others acted and the different clothes they wore, I deduced that the two Roman demigods held some authority, but even they (and everyone else) knelt in respect before Mercury. I was the only one that stood still, and decided last minute to remain standing. It would be awkward if I decided kneel down now.

"Greetings, demigods of the Legion!" Mercury exclaimed. "I present before you another of your brethren! He has recently passed Lupa's initiation and wishes to see what Camp Jupiter has to offer."

He looked at me, and I realized he wanted me to introduce myself, as in…introduce my fake alias. After all that persuading, I realized too late that I haven't come up with a new name. The last alias I used, William Fletcher, shouldn't be used for security reasons. Lynetta always told me to never use the same identity twice, making me keep track of them. I racked my brain quickly for names. Since I'd be spending time with Romans…a Roman-like name would be best.

"Hello," I started, a bit uneasy with the stares. "I'm Hadrian. Hadrian…Chase."

Hadrian was a deviant of Adrian, another one of my old aliases, and if my memory served me right, Hadrian was the name of a respected (and sane) Roman emperor who was also the architect of the Pantheon. I also decided to use Annabeth's surname since it was short and common. I also recalled how the architect-emperor was one of Annabeth's favorites—No surprise there.

"Hadrian Chase," Mercury repeated. If I wasn't being delusional, I would have sworn he sounded amused. "…will be staying here by Lupa's request, but it will only be for a few days before he is required to leave." He stared at the two Roman leaders. "In that short time, I trust that you all will
make sure he is welcomed and treated hospitably?"

The girl was the one who answered. "We'll be sure to, Lord Mercury." The boy gave a curt nod.

Mercury turned his attention to me, and whispered, "do not fail me."

His body began to glow, and each of us turned away as Mercury dispersed and shimmered away in a flash of gold.

The Romans continued to gawk at me rudely, and I bit the inside of my lip to prevent a scowl from emerging. The two leaders stood up and regarded me carefully. Noticing the audience, the blonde boy quickly snapped them out of their stupor.

"Alright, show's over!" he called. "Get back to work! We'll handle it from here."

The Romans reluctantly turned their faces away and returned to what they were doing.

"So," the boy said, "Mercury huh? Is he your father?"

I shook my head. "No, and I didn't get your names."

The girl narrowed her eyes even more, and I noticed that one of her hands was holding the hilt of her dagger. She looked like she was ready to take it out and slash me with it. "We'll answer your inquiries later, Hadrian Chase. For now, we ask that you follow us for questioning at the Principia."

I shrugged. "Whatever you say."

The two of them walked in front of me, whispering some things about my abrupt and unique arrival. They also questioned why I could only stay a few days, as well as the reason for Mercury's involvement. I pretended not to hear them. They were unintentionally helping me form answers for my interrogation. Without even meaning to, they also gave me my unofficial tour of Camp Jupiter. I saw demigods sitting around long, concrete barracks. There were a couple satyrs (or was it fauns?) pestering demigods like they were…beggars?

"That's horrendous! Seth exclaimed in disgust. Do Romans always treat satyrs like this? A faun was approaching a group of Roman demigods, and they quickly backed away from the faun like he was something repulsive, like trash.

"I think they're called 'fauns', Seth, I reminded. And yes, unfortunately they do."

We walked further down, and that was when I noticed the ghosts. They were everywhere. They emerged from windows, doors, even from the drainage pipes that were connected to the city's aqueducts. They were sprawled on the ground, the roofs, and lingered between groups of demigods.

Seth sounded sick. "Ghosts? What are they doing here? I recalled how Seth had a fear of the undead.

I gave a light smirk. "Is Seth frightened by Casper's friends? That's cute."

I could imagine Seth scowling indignantly. "Asshole, this isn't funny! You know how much I hate ghosts!"

"It's not like they can hurt us, I said. They're already dead."

"Tell that to Hades!" Seth retorted.

I sighed, "Seth, these spirits are different from those in the Underworld. These are Lares, remember?"
House gods. We read about them before. The most they can do is linger around, unless you disturb them. They're harmless.

It doesn't make them any less creepy, he grumbled.

We were approaching a large whitewashed building and like all the others, this one also had a red-tiled roof. The three of us walked into a horseshoe shaped entrance, guarded by two sentinels, and inside, the ground was stone-paved and walled up on all four sides, open to the air. The walls formed a rectangular court, with rows of columns and porticoes. We went past yet another open entrance, and there were purple banners with the initials SPQR before finally stepping into the principia's interior.

Two long seated chairs were set on a platform of stairs leading to them, and there was a large mosaic painting of Lupa with Romulus and Remus. The room was richly decorated: the floors were made with colorful marble, and the walls had velvet drapery with gold embroidery. There were tons of banners lined up in the back, as well as an iron-barred staircase leading down.

Each of them took a seat in the two chairs in the room. My sharp ears picked up metallic scrapping. I turned and my silver eyes widened as I took in a gold and silver greyhound running past me from two corners of the room and sat beside the girl.

"Let us begin," the girl said. "I am Reyna, praetor of the Twelfth Legion. I'm a daughter of Bellona."

"I'm Jason Grace," the boy introduced. "Also praetor…!"

"Grace?" I interrupted in shock. "Your last name is Grace?"

The greyhounds beside Reyna started to growl, its ruby eyes fixed on me.

"Yes, my last name is Grace," Jason said, suspicious. "What's it to you?"

I heard Seth give an exasperated sigh. Oh boy.

"Nothing," I lied, "It's just…a really interesting surname. I was surprised by its…uniqueness."

The dogs started to bark loudly. Reyna shot me a menacing glare.

"I forgot to mention," she said snidely. "My dogs, Aurum and Argentum, are able to detect any lies you say. If ordered, they would tear any liars to shreds, and you, Hadrian Chase, are lying."

Did she just…?! I swallowed uncomfortably, mentally scowling and cursing in my head. I bet Reyna purposely didn't tell me that little detail just to see me screw up. She wanted to trip me up?

Okay, Reyna, you want to play it that way? I'll return the favor.

I stared at the two dogs intently, and wondered if I could get them to be quiet. I knew I held absolute control over regular dogs, but would these dogs obey me?

It didn't hurt to try.

I forced a smile to my lips. "Wow, really? I didn't know your dogs had such a talent!" I started to walk towards them. "Do you mind if I pet them? Just for a little bit? I'm a huge dog lover, you see."

Reyna looked offended. "Yes, I do mind-!"
"Aurum and Argentum," I stated, with a slight edge of authority tucked in. The dogs stopped barking, and stared, their attention only on me. I didn't bother to look up and see Reyna's agitated expression, as well as Jason's amused look. "Can you two come over here please?"

Aurum and Argentum left Reyna's side, much to her displeasure, and sat down beside me. I dropped down to one knee, smiled gallantly, and petted their heads, which was smooth and cool to the touch. I could feel the praetors' stares on me as I murmured compliments to the two automaton dogs. I wondered if Walt could build something like this.

"These are some fine dogs, Reyna," I said. "Now that I'm seeing them up close, I see that your claims are true. Both of your dogs have an acute sense of hearing, don't they? Their hearing is as sharp as a polygraph, which allows them to hear my heartbeat. If it proves unsteady, then they would know I was lying. Those miniscule devices I see in their ears are the cause."

"H-how did you…" She cleared her throat and composed herself. "What you say is true, but how did you know that?"

"It's only a matter of observation," I said elusively. I wasn't about to tell them that I knew exactly when they were lying. I leaned down close to one of Aurum's ears, making it appear as an act of affection, and quietly hissed at it to shut up before repeating the command to Argentum.

I slowly stood back up. "It's a nice ability to have. I greatly admire them for it." I motioned for the dogs to return to their owner, and the two complied. "About your last name, Jason, I was really surprised. A friend I know shares the same surname, and for a moment, I thought the two of you were related before I realized it was impossible. As far as I know, she's an only child."

Jason grew interested. "Who's your friend?"

"Tabitha," I lied. By the off chance it was true, I didn't want Zeus (or Jupiter) to come down from Olympus to incinerate my ass. That is, if Mercury didn't do the task first for getting him into deep shit. I planned to question Thalia about this next time I saw her. I smiled when I realized the dogs were silent. "Do you know her?"

Predictably, Jason shook his head. "No."

"See? That's why I didn't bother to mention it." I said, and then I remembered how I cut him off. "Sorry for interrupting you earlier, Jason. You were about to mention something else?"

He nodded. "It's alright, I was only going to say that I was a praetor like Reyna, and that I'm a son of Jupiter."

I felt my heart stop.

*What a turn of events,* Seth whistled. *It looks like there was another Big Three kid we weren't aware of.*

*And the chances of him being Thalia's full blooded brother has gone up significantly,* I thought. *We are so-o talking to Thalia about this.*

*Agreed.*

"A son of Jupiter?" I echoed. "You mean the king of the gods?"

"Yeah."
"That's cool!" I said before toning down the sarcasm. "Do you have any brothers and sisters here? What about any...children of Neptune or Pluto?"

Jason looked uncomfortable. "No, it's just me."

I heard Seth let out a sigh of relief. It would be so weird if we returned to Camp Half-Blood while knowing about Percy's Roman half-brother or sister.

"Enough!" Reyna cut in, still a bit shaken from what I did earlier. Though, she could've fooled me if it weren't for her unsteady heart. I'd give her props for being so convincing. "We are here for your questioning, Hadrian Chase. You may discuss other trivialities with Jason later."

Jason turned to her, surprised. "Later?" He sounded reluctant. Did I creep him out already?

Anyone would be after seeing what you did to the dogs, Seth muttered. Learn some tact.

Reyna ignored him. "Lord Mercury told us that you would only be staying here temporarily. Can you tell us why?"

"I'm sorry, Reyna," I said. "The answer is sensitive. I am forbidden to explain the reason by Lord Mercury himself."

Reyna's eyes narrowed dangerously, and after giving a quick glance to her dogs, who remained silent, she continued. "You said that Lord Mercury isn't your father?"

"He is not."

"Who is your godly parent?"

"Apollo," I answered, causing them to look surprised for a moment. "Apollo is my father. I was claimed by him a while ago."

"How old are you anyway?" Jason asked.

"I'm fifteen."

"Fifteen," Reyna repeated, incredulous. "You're a little old for a new recruit. Mercury also told us how you only recently passed Lupa's test. Where were you before that?"

I thought about it before answering carefully. "I've been on my own. Traveling."

"You've been traveling for fifteen years?"

"Of course not, I started when I was thirteen. Before that, I was living in a...foster home. Besides, America's a big country. There's a lot of places to see and do."

"What about the monsters?" Jason countered. "As a child of an Olympian, your scent would be pretty strong. You must have encountered them many times, and survived. You must have had training."

"I'm mostly self-taught."

"Mostly?" Reyna echoed.

"Before Lupa helped me refine them," I answered.
Reyna shifted in her chair, and silently looked to Jason for answers. I could tell Reyna didn't believe me, but she had no choice: her dogs weren't growling and she was too dependent on them to suspect my claims as lies. This was one of the reasons why you should never depend on others to make your decisions. You'd never suspect them to be foiled.

They had their mental conversation for a while, keeping me hanging for who knew how long. Then, Jason addressed me.

"How long are you staying here?"

"Only five days," I said.

"Only five?" he exclaimed. "That's so short!"

"Believe me, if I could stay longer, I would," I assured him.

"Where do you plan on going after your term here ends?" Reyna questioned.

"I can't answer that," I said tightly. "If you really must know, then ask the gods. They have the answers."

Again, the two of them shared a look of unease.

"Do you have letters of recommendation?" Jason asked quietly.

"Letters?"

"Your letters help us determine which cohort to put you in," he explained. "They can be written by family members if you're a legacy, or by an alumni. Basically, there needs to be someone who can vouch for you."

I thought about it: Walt would be considered an alumni, but if I used him, then I'd have to explain how I knew him, and risk revealing my true identity. Walt also wanted to remain anonymous, and whatever his reasons for it, I wasn't about to deny him that.

"Does Mercury count as one?" I said instead.

"No," Reyna answered, so quick that I could tell she sounded pleased. Great, she was trying to get me back. "We do not include gods as vouchers, unless the case is special. It would make everything too complicated to sort out, and lead to unfair treatment."

"So my case isn't special?" I questioned.

She ignored my question. "Do you have other letters?"

"Uh, I don't have any on me," I said quietly.

"No letters," she said. "What a shame."

A shame my ass, I thought angrily. She's mocking me, isn't she Seth?

I'm not surprised. You left a bad impression.

What bad impression? I demanded.

You shouldn't have messed with her dogs! Seth scolded. You screwed the whole thing up!
She tried to trip me up first!

It's part of her job! Seth retorted. She's only trying to figure out where we came from, and see if we can be trusted or not.

Well, I'm SOR-RY for trying to cover our tracks! If I hadn't done something about the dogs, then they would have known I was lying!

It's called subtlety, Hunter, Seth muttered. You could have decided to say half-truths instead of straight out lies!

Same difference, I said stubbornly.

Not this time!

While I was busy talking to the snappy Greek, Reyna had turned to her partner. "I believe the fifth cohort will be receiving a new occupant."

Jason sighed. He didn't sound surprised. "Alright."

"So what now?" I asked.

"Jason will be giving you a tour," Reyna said. "If you have any further questions, then be sure to direct it to him or your colleagues in the fifth cohort, whom you will soon be acquainted. Also, Jason, do you mind?"

"Yes?"

"Take him to see Octavian," Reyna reminded, "and be sure to tell me what the auguries say."

"I will," he answered.

Reyna nodded. "Your questioning is over. Welcome to Camp Jupiter, Hadrian Chase." She got up from her chair, and with a sweep of her purple robe, she walked out into another room located on the side. Aurum and Argentum followed after her.

When I knew she was out of earshot, I muttered. "Isn't she cheerful?"

Jason sighed. "Today's not one of our better days."

"What do you mean?"

"Some matters came up..." he said, and that was all he decided to tell me before leading me out of the Principia. "Come on, it's time I introduce you to our augur."

-0-

When Jason told me that he would be introducing me to a legacy of Apollo, I thought I had constructed a good image of what this Octavian would be like. What I didn't expect, however, was a shady as shit anemic who played with stuffed toys.

Before the encounter, Jason had pointed out key locations for me to remember on the way. He showed me glimpses of the Roman bathhouse, the barracks, and their mess hall. There was also a large Roman amphitheater towering above the other pavilions, and across a long bridge, I noticed a valley of Roman villas and houses. It was colorful compared to the brown and grey barracks, and I noticed plazas, markets, and parents looking after their children.

"Families?" I repeated. The idea was unheard of. I recalled how Lynetta told Seth that it was rare for demigods to live past their twenties, much less grow old enough to raise a family. Camp Half-Blood didn't have such a place, and the Legion did?

He nodded. "That's why we have so many legacies, children or grandchildren of demigods. We have more legacies than we have demigods here. Some of them were born in New Rome, while others were invited in with their letters of recommendation."

"So every demigod has the option to live in this New Rome?" I asked.

"Well, in order to qualify for a spot, each of us have to give ten years of service to the Legion," he explained. "When you finish five years, you'll have the option to run for an elected position, like centurion or become a praetor like Reyna and I. Most of the time, we usually go on to attend University, and once they graduate, they either continue to live in New Rome or they go out."

"A university," I repeated, slightly in awe of the idea. "You guys got everything planned out."

"We're pretty organized," Jason admitted. "I heard the university is really nice. I'm thinking of attending it in a few years, once my ten years are up. It may not be as big and grand like Harvard, but for demigods, it comes very close. The school has every major possible, and if you're an athlete, you won't have any trouble finding a good team."

"Is it well protected?"

"We have our defenses," Jason said. "It's also the Legion's responsibility to protect it at all costs. Any monster invasions would have to defeat our military first before ever reaching New Rome."

I stared at the valley a bit longer, trying to imagine spending my college and adult years here. Everything Jason told me sounded too good to be true, like a flickering dream. I swallowed slowly, feeling a slow rise in anticipation within me. I wanted to enter New Rome, making my desire to live even stronger than before. They want ten years of service? That was a small price compared to a lifetime of normalcy and protection.

You're forgetting someone, Hunter, Seth replied. You got me in here. Mercury was already very reluctant in extending our time to five days. The gods would sooner kill us than let us serve ten years here.

I felt my jaw tighten. With only a few words, Seth crushed the fleeting dream to bits. I wished he wasn't so pessimistic all the time. Right...oh well. We'll find another way.

Jason guided me down a crooked stone path. There were altars and statues of different Roman gods stood silently beside them, like a row of pillars. Their lifeless eyes seemed to drive holes into me as we walked past them and up a set of stairs. Inside, I noticed a humongous gold statue dressed in a purple toga, who likely represented Jupiter, King of the gods.

I snorted. Like Jupiter didn't have enough statues dedicated to him. I saw at least ten other statues of Jupiter in the courtyards, and a ton of other statues dedicated to Mars, Apollo, and even Victoria, the Roman goddess of victory. Where was Diana's statue? She was an Olympian too, and yet I didn't see that many altars dedicated in her honor.

There was a light blonde boy standing in front of the Jupiter statue. Jason and I walked forward towards him, and the echoing sound of our steps alerted the boy of our presence, and the boy, Octavian, turned around to greet us. There was a stuffed teddy bear tucked beside his robe, and I also
spotted spilled stuffing on the altar of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

"Jason," he said evenly, and he narrowed his eyes when he saw me, and if I wasn't seeing things, I would sworn he clenched his dagger tighter. "Who's this?"

"He's Hadrian Chase," Jason introduced before I opened my mouth. "He's the one Mercury brought in. Hadrian, this is Octavian, legacy of Apollo and our augur."

I nodded, careful not to let any emotions show. I couldn't explain why, but the way Octavian was staring at me, like he was dissecting me with his pale eyes, put me on edge.

"Ah, that one," Octavian said. He gave a courteous smile, but I could tell instantly that it was fake.

*How can you tell?* Seth asked.

*Look at his eyes,* I told him. *See how blank and empty they are? They don't match his smile. He doesn't mean well.*

"So... Hadrian," Octavian said slowly, as if trying to get a feel of my alias. "Any relation to the Hadrian?"

*Unless Hadrian was also a clone of Diana, probably not.* I thought sarcastically.

"Maybe," I said instead. "I can't even recall the names of my grandparents, much less my ancestors, but if Hadrian was a descendent of my father, Apollo, then we might be related."

"Many of our emperors claim to be legacies," Octavian said. "Like my namesake for example. Emperor Hadrian's history is largely unknown before his adoption, but it's highly speculated that he was a legacy of Jupiter, not Apollo."

"Too bad," I said.

Apparently, Jason had enough of the icebreaker. "Octavian, Hadrian still needs time to set up before the day ends. Read us his augury. That's what we're here for."

"Patience, praetor," Octavian said, like the title was degrading. "I was only getting to know our new recruit better. Lord Mercury did tell us to treat him hospitably. You should know better, Grace, then to go against a god's orders."

Jason bristled, but kept his face stern. It was only my first time meeting Octavian, but even I got the hidden message: *you lack what it takes to be praetor.*

"Just read him his augury," he said tightly. "The sooner you're done, the sooner we can leave you alone with your bears..."

...*And the sooner I don't have to tolerate you* was left unsaid.

Octavian smiled at him ruefully before he asked, "come, Hadrian. Let's see what the auguries have to say about you."

Octavian held out his dagger at the ready and turned towards his altar of stuffing. Hesitantly, I decided to step closer to see what he was doing. I was still skeptical over how this kid could read anything out of cotton and fur balls. Up close, I noticed that there were some intact stuffed animals behind the pile of stuffing. Octavian browsed his selection of victims before he snatched up a stuffed Bambi and proceeded to cut it to shreds.
He narrowed his eyes as he analyzed the stuffing, and moments later, a crude smile emerged. "The auguries have spoken! Hadrian Chase, you are allowed to join the Legion."

_No shit, Sherlock_, I thought, annoyed. This guy's making up bullshit, wasting my time here when I could be out doing some more sightseeing or meet someone more agreeable.

Jason rolled his eyes. "Okay, but what does the message say?"

"Oh, nothing much, just something about how 'the Hunter will lead the trail'." Octavian said. I almost choked. "I figured that meant Hadrian will bring us what the Legion wants. Right, Hunter?"

I stiffened, but kept my face as neutral as possible. "I'm more of an archer than a hunter."

"An archer?" Octavian said sardonically. "Oh, that's nice."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

"It's nothing, Hadrian," Jason cut in quickly. He stared at me hard, mentally telling me that he would explain _later_. "I'll be sure to inform Reyna of this recent augury."

"On that topic," Octavian added. "Perhaps you and Reyna can also think about the Sibylline books!"

"I told you, Octavian, that we don't have the time and manpower to search for what's already lost," Jason said sternly. "If you want them so much, then go search for them yourself!"

"As much as I would like to do so, my position as augur hinders me from going," Octavian pointed out. "The Armilustrium is approaching, and as the person in charge of the proceedings, I cannot allow for anyone to render the ceremony imperfect because of my absence."

"Armillastrium?" I repeated. "The purification of the army? What is that about?"

"It's a sacred military festival," Jason explained. "It's in honor of Mars. The Legion will be assembled and reviewed on the Circus Maximus on October 19th. We will each gather our armor and weapons on the Fields of Mars for ritual purification. Then, there will be lots of trumpets and partying."

"Sounds like fun," I commented.

"The latter part, you mean," Jason said. "We have to clean over hundreds of armor, shields, and weapons that's been rusting away in our inventory first."

I winced slightly. "Yeah, not so fun."

"The Legion is not all fun and games," Octavian said. "You have to earn your keep and respect."

His eyes flickered to me, as if to say: _you may be favored by Mercury, but don't expect any from me._

"Funny you say that, Octavian," Jason said narrowly. "Just do your job, and we won't have any problems. Make sure to tell me or Reyna when you decipher any more new prophecies."

Octavian crossed his thin arms, his hand still held the dagger dangerously. "Of course...praetor."

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"What's with you and Octavian?" I asked. I took the offered milkshake that Jason bought for me from one of the open market stands. We were walking slowly between the barracks. Many of the
demigods and Lares had gone to Mess Hall since it was lunch time, leaving the two of us with privacy.

Jason sighed. "He's…an annoying, power-hungry prick to say the least. He's been after my position for years, and when it was open, I got more votes than he did."

"So he vents out his anger by trying to undermine your leadership?"

"Yeah, and it's getting really, really tiring."

"Why don't you just call him out on it?" I asked. "Or maybe zap him with some lightning? You're the praetor. Can't you like, kick him out?"

Jason smiled. "If it was that easy, Octavian would have been long gone. Reyna doesn't like him either, but Octavian's got other friends, most of them blackmailed or bought. So we're stuck with him."

"Is he really a legacy of Apollo?" I questioned. "He doesn't seem like the type."

Jason shrugged. "He 'claims' to have the gift of prophecy, and I heard he had good letters when he got in. That's why he's in the First Cohort, and the reason why we can't get rid of him."

"So these cohorts are organized by these letters?" I said. He nodded. "So the first is the best and the fifth is the worst?"

"It's more than that," Jason said. "The Fifth Cohort wasn't always the 'worst'. There was this guy called Michael Varus, who decided to go to Alaska in the 1980s to complete this prophecy, even though he was warned that it was still too early. Instead of completing it, he lost the Legion's eagle-!"

"Eagle?" I said dubiously.

"It's the Legion's symbol," he reiterated. "It's a large imperial gold eagle stuck on a pole, at least that's what the sources say, like the top of a banner. We used to use it to display the strength and pride of the Legion whenever we go into battle. Anyway, not only did he lose the eagle, which was really bad, he also lost a lot of our imperial gold weapons on the expedition."

"How did that happen?"

"We don't know," he said. "Everyone who was on the expedition was dead, went insane, or refused to talk about it. We can only guess what happened, but it didn't matter. The eagle and weapons are lost, and the Fifth Cohort was shamed since then."

"That's not fair," I said. "That happened a long time ago. Shouldn't the Fifth Cohort be given a reprieve?"

"That's what I keep telling everyone, but history is how people view you here," he said sadly. "I'm in the Fifth Cohort as well, and I've been trying to get people to look past this and see the Fifth differently. I thought maybe…maybe becoming praetor would change things, but it didn't. If I knew that…"

"…then you wouldn't have wanted to become praetor?" I guessed. Jason nodded, surprised.

"How did you guess?" he said warily.

"I have good intuition, and I can…sort of relate."
"Really?"

"Yeah," I said. "Foster care, remember? I was the oldest kid, and they figured that meant I had to look after all the little ones."

"How did you feel about that?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It was annoying. I never had any time for myself. There was always this kid that got themselves into some trouble or they wanted me to do stuff for them. Then they go on their merry way once they found a family to live with and…"

I stopped abruptly, unwanted images started to resurface into my mind, and I shook my head to shake them out. I felt…angry. The I could stab the next monster I saw in the face multiple times without flinching’ angry. I found myself clenching my teeth and my fingers were curled into fists so tightly that my nails drew blood. I relaxed my hold when I noticed, and the marks soon disappeared, leaving no trace behind.

_Calm down_, I told myself sternly. _You can't make a scene. Not now and not ever._

"Hadrian?" Jason said.

I let out a relaxed breath. "Sorry. I remembered something I shouldn't have."

Surprisingly, Jason didn’t say anything. He didn’t mutter an 'Are you okay?' or a 'What?' or anything in that manner of speaking. He only stood there silently, his gaze contemplative, but not intrusive. The silence was golden, and I was glad for it.


"For what?"

I smiled. "For trying to understand."

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Chapter End Notes

*Around this time, Jason is the only Big Three kid in Camp Jupiter. In SON, Hazel arrives to the Camp next September (it's October in my plot) and Frank arrives later than her. Nico, obviously, is still at Camp Half-Blood with his sister Bianca.*

**I made up the part about Hadrian possibly being a legacy of Jupiter. Jupiter just seems like the best choice since a majority of emperors (like Octavian had claimed in SON) were legacies of the gods.*
Obligations

Chapter Notes

WARNING: The content in this chapter can be psychologically disturbing to some of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jason and I were greeted by a food tornado.

After our tour around Camp Jupiter was put to a halt, Jason suggested that we go to Mess Hall to have lunch. When the two of us entered, the doors instantly swung wide open by a strong breeze. My auburn hair was blowing this way and that, and I had to lift a hand to keep my hair from obscuring my vision. Briefly, my eyes adjusted and I noticed the 'tornado' was actually a group of wind spirits, *aurae*, who were passing out food orders to the seated Romans. I saw a bowl of spaghetti fly by, as well as some clam chowder, macaroni, and a Caesar salad being prepared in a matter of seconds before being put into someone's plate. Everyone's plate and drink was always full.

The Mess Hall was overly crowded, and the conversations easily echoed and bounced about the walls and banners. I heard whispers of gossip, and people exchanging seats to talk with friends. I also heard a couple talking about my abrupt arrival, and when they noticed my stare, they digressed to another topic of interest. Jason eventually noticed my discomfort, and with a wave of his hand, the winds died down for a moment while he guided me to a table in the back near the kitchen. Noticing the sparsely populated table, I knew it was an undesirable spot.

There were already two people there. I noticed a dark-haired guy who was downing himself with fruit punch, and there was a caramel-skinned girl sitting across from him, who looked like how she was discussing something with him before she noticed our approach.

"Jason, just in time!" the girl exclaimed. "I was just telling Dakota about a plan that can get us to win the next war game, and I really want to go over it with you…"

"Later, Gwen," Jason replied. "Dakota, Gwen, I want you guys to meet our new recruit."

I gave a sheepish wave. "Hey."

"Oh, you're that…that Hadrian guy, right?" Dakota recalled. His eyelids drooped, like he was struggling to stay awake. "The one with Lord Mercury."

"That's me."

"So they're putting you with us, huh?" Gwen said. I nodded, and then she lifted her hand, and I took it. "Welcome to the Fifth Cohort! Dakota and I are the centurions. Trust me, despite what everyone says, it's *really* not that bad…"

"Tell that to Bobby," Dakota muttered. "He's still cleaning out Hannibal's stable with a *toothbrush*."

"Hannibal?" I questioned.

"Our elephant," Jason said. "He likes to get involved with the war games—a competition of sorts
between all the Cohorts. Hannibal got paint spattered during our last game, and it became our responsibility to clean him up."

"Yeah, because we lost," Dakota said haggardly. "You should have seen it Haddy—the fella looked like the Joker gone wrong."

"We only need to try harder next time," Gwen said, "and by harder, you need to cut the juice and put yourself together! You're such a drunk!"

Dakota shrugged, but it looked more like he flopped his whole upper body than his shoulders. "It's hereditary. I can't help it."

"I take it you're a son of…Bacchus?" I asked, sitting down next to Gwen. Jason also took a seat beside Dakota.

"Right-O!" he said. "I need my sugar to function. Without it, I wouldn't have made senior centurion." He propped his shoulders on the table to steady himself, and on his bare forearm, I noticed a dolphin tattoo, the letters SPQR etched above it, as well as a series of lines.

"So Hadrian," Gwen said. "How did you meet Mercury?"

I hesitated, trying to think up a reasonable answer. I also saw Jason straighten up, his blue eyes fixed on me carefully. "I met him after I finished Lupa's test. He's the one who took me here."

Gwen was surprised. "You mean, he escorted you all the way?"

"Yes…." I said. "Something wrong with that?"

"Tradition demands that when we finish Lupa's training, we are supposed to find our way to Camp Jupiter on our own," Jason answered, his eyes not leaving mine. "It was how Romulus and Remus did it. After they were old enough to leave Lupa's care, they left to find a place to establish Rome. You never mentioned that Mercury took you all the way."

"You didn't ask," I said coolly. "I didn't know it was such a big deal."

Jason tightened his jaw. He looked like he had a whole bunch of questions he wanted answers to, but held back. "You said you travelled around a lot, Hadrian. Do you mind telling us what you did during those travels?"

Or in other words: *Convince me your story's veracity or I'll interrogate you all over again.*

Briefly, I thought about refusing Jason's request, but something told me that action would make me more suspicious, and getting a son of Jupiter pissed off would not be in my best interest.

*I'm glad you value our wellbeing,* Seth muttered.

"It's a long story," I started.

"You don't have to tell us everything," she said. "Tell us the memorable parts."

All three of them looked at me expectantly. It appeared that I didn't have a choice, so I decided to give a summarized, carefully edited version of my trips to DC and the Hoover Dam during the Quest to save Artemis. I also told them a bit on how I encountered hydras in Seattle, and my Boston trip. Gwen and Jason listened, and even Dakota grew interested. I also got around to getting some food while I narrated. They interrupted my partially true story with questions and comments, and by the
time I finished, my stomach was satisfied, and I could tell they looked impressed.

"Is there anywhere you haven't been?" Gwen said. "It's like you've seen everything! I've never been to Seattle or Boston before."

"I still haven't seen much of the southern states," I said honestly. "I heard New Orleans is quite nice, and Texas and Florida don't sound too bad."

"Did you eat anything good?" Dakota asked.

I thought about it. "I think I…ate at a Chinese buffet while I was in Boston, and maybe a taco or two while I was at Hoover Dam. It was tasty. You guys should get out more often. You don't know what you're missing."

"Maybe when I'm done with college," Gwen said, "and raise enough money. I'll travel the world!"

"Eh, I think I'm good where I am," Dakota said, and then he let out a burp. "Definitely good…"

Lunch was soon over, and everyone filed out of Mess Hall and went back to their duties. Since Jason had his praetor duties to attend to, Gwen volunteered to show me around afterwards. The tour was fun while it lasted. I got to see the unicorn stables, temples, the shores of the Little Tiber, and even more temples. I also met Bobby while he was tending Hannibal the elephant. He seemed an okay fellow, an animal lover. While Gwen and I watched him pack up his stuff, I asked him what other animals the Camp had.

"We don't have many animals besides Hannibal and the unicorns," Bobby said. "Reyna has her dogs and her Pegasus, but she's the only one who has her own pets. We only have the animals out of necessity."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"A shavings of a unicorn horn can be used for medical reasons," he explained. "Hannibal is used for carrying large heavy things and war games."

"So you guys don't have a Pegasus or horse stable?" I asked. "Not even some dogs?"

Bobby shook his head. "Not really. We're not too keen on cavalry. We Romans like to fight on foot with a sword or spear."

"What about archery?" I asked, reminded of Octavian's insulting remark.

Gwen answered. "Archery is frowned upon, just like cavalry. They're viewed as passive weapons of war. Unless you're a child of Apollo, which you are, we tend to avoid using bows and arrows."

"Only swords and spears and the like," I summed up. "I can't say I'm impressed with your variety."

"Well, it's been that way for centuries," Bobby said. "We like to stick to tradition."

I nodded, and I struggled to hold back a scoff. I was starting to think this whole 'tradition' thing was bogus. I wouldn't be surprised if this tradition was what caused Walt to leave and never come back. If Romans were so against archery and horses, then modern weaponry like guns and bombs were a huge no. Camp Jupiter had yet to advance from Roman times, and it looked like they were proud of that sad fact.

"Isn't that a disadvantage?" I decided to say. "Even the mortals are ahead of you guys in terms of
weaponry. What happens if you were up against say, a gunman? Bullets are faster than swords or spears."

Gwen frowned. "We avoid fights with mortals, but if that happened, we could always count on our reflexes to dodge and knock them out."

"Besides," Bobby added. "We don't have to worry about mortals. The Mist is our friend, and the gods don't like mortals getting into our business. I doubt any of us would get into that dilemma."

_If only he knew_, Seth muttered. _The gods may not use mortals, but it doesn't stop the Titans from using them._

_Exactly_, I agreed. _If the Titans were to attack here with a human army instead of monsters, it would be a disaster. We're not immune to modern weaponry like the monsters are._

_I don't think the Titans would do that_, Seth said. _Monsters are stronger, and Titans generally look down on mortals. They think they're weak. It's unlikely they would use them in their grand schemes._

_One can hope._

-o-

When I finally settled into my bunk in the Fifth Cohort barracks, I fell into a deep sleep, and entered the intangible space in my mind.

I was walking down a narrow dark hall, my eyes had no trouble seeing what was ahead despite having no lights present. A polished door came into view, and I pulled down the silver handle. The door opened silently, revealing yet another hall, only this time, the walls were aligned with photo frames. The walls were as dark as the floor, obscuring their edges, and made the pictures look like they were floating in midair. I allowed my gaze to linger on one picture for a moment before I turned my gaze away sharply and kept on walking.

A second door came up, and the wood was made of ebony with a platinum door knob. I opened the door with a creek, and I was met with tangled chains of steel. They were everywhere: dangling loosely above and beside me. If I wasn't too careful, I could end up getting stuck or lost in this room. I lowered my head to avoid touching them, but my arm accidentally brushed against one. I momentarily saw a flash of white light and there was piercing screech ringing in my ears. I backed away from it, a hand to my chest, and the light disappeared. When I finally calmed down, I proceeded where I left off and quickly got out of that room with no trouble.

When I entered the next room, I saw Seth seated in a tall armchair, staring blankly at the fireplace in front of him. The fire was a bright silver color, and if one were to feel it, the flames would be icy cold.

"There you are," I smiled. "Took me a while to find you. You weren't in the main room."

"I was exploring," he said quietly. "This place is bigger than I pictured."

I walked forward, and settled down on the black leather sofa located right besides Seth. I studied my other half discreetly. He had his face pointed down, his slender arms were rested in his lap, and his back was pressed against the chair. His auburn hair appeared redder in the light, and his pale skin seemed almost...translucent. His eyes looked weary, and I could see the flames dancing in those orbs of silver. Seth caught my stare.

"Something wrong?" he asked.
"You seem troubled," I said, leaning forward with folded arms on the side of the sofa. "You also look tired. Can you tell me what's bothering you?"

Seth swallowed heavily. "It's just…I still can't wrap my head around you, Hunter. When you weren't here, this place is so dark and lonely. I can't imagine what you went through in here all on your own." He looked curious. "How do you bear it?"

"I don't," I said simply. "I don't have a choice in the matter. I just do. I'll admit the place is dreary, especially for a newcomer like you, but for me…it's all I'd ever known before I could start seeing the outside world in your eyes."

Seth took in my response silently. He got up from the armchair and sat down on the sofa next to me.

"Why do you tolerate me?" he asked. "Don't you…resent me for ignoring you and trapping you in here?"

"So that's what this is about," I said, figuring out the root of Seth's conflict. "You're afraid that I would rebel, and maybe even suppress you in here. Am I right?"

Seth looked sheepish. "I do not mean any offense, if you can believe that."

I smiled. "Nah, I'm not offended. I think it's smart. You don't know enough about me while I know everything there is about you. To you, I'm like an intruder that's here to stay."

"So, you do understand where I'm coming from," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Well, duh. I'm you, remember? I'm the only one who understands."

"Yet I don't understand you," Seth pointed out.

"Then how about we change that, huh?" I suggested. "Ask me anything you like, and I swear to answer truthfully, but I may also decide not to respond."

"You would do that?" Seth said, surprised.

"Ask away."

"Okay," he said, thinking for a moment. "Why are you so sadistic?"

I stifled a laugh. "Your first question. Why am I not surprised?"

Seth looked annoyed. "I've been trying to figure it out, but I've yet to reach a conclusion. It's been bugging the Hades out of me. I don't see how you, who is essentially me, could enjoy causing others pain. I sure don't!"

"You sure about that, Seth?" I said. "You got to remember that you are responsible for shaping me into who I am. The fact that I'm sadistic is because you made me that way."

"You're blaming this on me?" he said incredulously.

"Well, it might have been unintentional," I admitted. "But have you ever felt angry? Caged? Or that urge to get back at someone for hurting you, but couldn't because of this or that? You've been left behind to pick up someone else's trash too many times, Seth. Also, that Aphrodite bitch and the whole Nemesis deal? Way to amp that up, me."

Seth clenched his jaw tightly. He wasn't convinced, but he decided to accept my explanation. "How
is Nemesis involved?"

"Goddess of retribution, Seth," I reminded. "You really think that tattoo we got on our wrist is for show? Nemesis also added in her own characteristics into us, or just me actually since I was already the vengeful type."

Again, my other half was quiet, silently absorbing the info like a sponge.

"I think I answered that question thoroughly," I said. "Let's move on." Seth agreed.

"What do you want with me?" he said suspiciously. "What do you want out of this?"

"I want what you want," I answered vaguely. "I want Venus to pay for her crimes just as much as you do, and I also said that I want you to trust me, depend on me. I know what I'm asking for is a lot on your part, but because I understand you completely, I'm not asking you to give me what I want. Not until you're ready."

Seth shifted in his seat, his eyes narrowed and away from my gaze. "You're serious."

"I am."

Seth swallowed uneasily, but he seemed to force himself to look at me, trying to mask his unease. He still wasn't comfortable with having me around. "That sounds...good and all, but everything you told me only serves to benefit me. You must have other goals that are different from mine, goals that benefit only you."

"I do."

"Can you tell me?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, but I'm not going to answer that."

"Why?" he asked. He didn't sound demanding.

"It's personal to me," I said, "but I'll have you know that my plans won't put those you care about at risk. That's all I'll say."

"Is that a fact?"

I nodded firmly.

"Fine," he said, but I could tell he was reluctant to accept my ambiguous answer.

Now that he got the important questions out of the way, Seth asked me some more questions involving my likes and dislikes, my preferences, and even the type of people I liked to hang out with. Most of these answers were in conjunction with his, but then the topic of children came up.

"I don't like kids."

"Why?" he asked. "What's not to like? They're so cute, innocent, optimistic, and-!"

"...and they're annoying, naïve, ungrateful, and exceptionally stupid," I finished.

Seth made a face. "Weren't we all, and you're only focusing on the bad things!"

"You're also focusing only on the good things," I said back. "I don't like them, and I have little
tolerance for them. Nothing you say will change my mind."

"Lucy's a kid."

"Lucy...is different," I said. "She's like family, and you care about her." I would never harm Lucy on Seth's behalf.

"I do," Seth said, smiling briefly. "I don't get it. Shouldn't you like kids? Artemis is the goddess of childbirth."

"She is," I agreed, "except that's Artemis you're talking about. She may be associated with childbirth, but Diana isn't. My mother is the goddess of the moon, the hunt, maidens, and wild animals. Childbirth isn't under her job description."*

"So that's why you don't like kids."

"No," I corrected. "It only means I'm not as good as handling them like you are. Whether I like or dislike them is up to me."

Sensing how stubborn I was, Seth sighed and decided to move on. I answered the next couple easily, until…

"What do you think about love, Hunter?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said. Seth frowned.

"What do you mean by 'nothing'? Do you agree with it? Do you hate it or what?"

"Exactly what I mean. There's nothing I can say about it. I don't like it and I don't hate it."

"You said you hate Aphrodite-or Venus-whatever," Seth said, sounding confused. "Wouldn't that mean you hate love?"

"Venus is a fraud," I said narrowly. "I hate her for who she is as a goddess, but for what she supposedly stands for, I have no feelings about it."

Seth was perplexed. "How does that work?"

"Let me clarify," I said. "I can't like or hate something that I don't believe is real."

"You...think that love doesn't exist," he whispered.

"Yes, and it's not think, Seth. I know it doesn't exist!" I exclaimed. "That's why Venus is a fraud. She's standing for something that's as much a myth as the Easter Bunny. There is no love in this world, Seth, only a series of obligations. You 'love' your parents because they take care of you. You 'love' your friends because they're nice and care about you. You 'love' your spouse because you want to have a family and because their presence is pleasing and they take care of your needs. Why do you think there are so many break-ups and divorces? So much cheating going on? Or children rebelling against their parents or the reverse, parents abusing their kids? It's because one of the two who entered their set obligation either breaks or defiles the pact. That is what it means to 'love'."

I paused to catch my breath, suddenly realizing how I was out of breath. I couldn't recall a time I've allowed myself to talk for this long without interruption. Absentmindedly, I allowed my gaze to wander to the stationary clock that always struck midnight. In this realm, Time was of no importance. My other half was bewildered, and for a moment, it looked like he wanted to refute, but decided
"Love's not real," I insisted, and Seth tensed up as I moved a little closer so I was only an arm's length away from him. "Do you understand, Seth? It's only a fancy illusion to get people to abide by their natural obligations. Venus isn't a goddess of love, but of an invisible force that drove people to commit to others. To form relationships and groups in order to fit in with society."

Again, Seth didn't answer me, and his silence put me on edge. Did he not believe me? Did he not understand what I said? Was I not clear enough?

"Tell me you what you think, Seth," I urged. "I need your honest opinion."

Seth hesitated, "Hunter…when did you start thinking this?"

I clenched my jaw tightly. "What?"

"Love not being real…where did you get that idea?" Seth said, conflicted. "How did you get it? Everything you said about love being an obligation? T-that's messed up."

I narrowed my eyes dangerously. "Mess up how?"

"Love does exist, Hunter," Seth said. "I'm no expert, but I do know Love is an innate feeling. It can't be something so mechanical like an obligation. I've seen what genuine Love is, Hunter. Ms. Lewinsky's shown it to me, and also Lucy and our friends at Camp Half Blood."

I scoffed angrily. "Genuine love? Ha! That's hypocrisy at its finest! There is no genuine love! It's fake! It's an illusion! Venus is…is…!"

"…a bitch, I know," Seth interrupted. "I hate her, and if Venus is the reason why you think Love is fake, then I would understand. She's only the puppeteer, the representative, just like her son, Cupid, but since you separated the two…” He sighed, and placed a hand on his forehead. "I may not pursue love, Hunter, but I wouldn't go so far as to dismiss it as a myth. That's your belief. Not mine."

I felt my hands shaking, like my whole body was about to explode. Seth didn't accept them. He didn't believe them. I thought he (me) would understand, yet, it appeared that I overestimated our similarities. I was alone on this. I could tell what he was thinking; the way he would shift his eyes from my gaze, and the way his body was facing away from me…he's even more wary of me now than a minute before. He thought I was insane, or worse, a misunderstood idiot.

I shouldn't have told him, I thought regretfully. Seth and everyone else is too ensnared by the drama bitch's facade. I need to wring that bitch's neck and get the damn whore to expose her lies, and then, Seth will be sure to accept me.

With those plans in mind, I decided to divert the topic. "Do you have other questions for me?"

"Only one," he whispered, and then he looked up at me firmly. "Do you resent me, Hunter?"

I took a moment to absorb the question's meaning, and pondered through my answer choices. Did I resent Seth? Or did I not? Whatever I say would determine how my other half would see me. I sighed, and answered honestly.

"No, I do not resent you."

Not anymore.
Seth nodded curtly, but I noticed how his body was still tense as he got up from the sofa and walked to the door, like he wanted to be left alone. I was confused by this. Did Seth not believe me?

"Where are you going?" I called. He turned around.

"You need to rest," he said briskly, "and I want to do some exploring on my own. I've yet to see some of the other rooms." He smiled, but he and I both knew it wasn't genuine. "You need the energy this time. See you later, okay?"

I nodded glumly. "Okay."

Seth nodded briefly before he walked out and shut the door behind him. I sighed loudly, stretched my arms up and plopped down on the sofa, my head and back resting comfortably against the leather. I placed a hand to my forehead.

"I screwed up..."

The next morning, I was shaken awake by Bobby.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head!" he said. I was lying flat on my chest with both hands buried under my pillow. He shook my shoulder. "Time to get up!"

"Five more minutes," I grumbled, snuggling even closer to my pillow and blanket. I heard Bobby back off for a moment, and a second later, he swiped the blanket out of my grasp. My eyes shot open, and my body recoiled from the sudden lack of warmth.

I hugged my pillow tighter, and hissed, "give it back!"

"Then get up," Bobby replied. When I still made no move to get up, he added, "Maybe I should get Dakota to wake you. I hear the fruit punch really wakes people up."

I glared at him resentfully, and forced myself to sit up. I looked at the beloved pillow in my arms and sighed dramatically. Good bye for now, my fluffy friend.

Seeing that I was up, Bobby leaped off the steps, grabbed some toiletries, and went out of the room, his disheveled brown hair vanished out of sight.

My eyes refused to open all the way as I reluctantly climbed down from my bunk and mindlessly changed my clothes and washed up. While I brushed my teeth, my eyes lingered to the clock above me: it was only 6:40 am. I hate mornings.

I met up with Dakota, Bobby, and Jason at Mess Hall, and as soon as I finished my plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, the aurae swept up my mess, and I was ordered to go out on patrol with other Fifth Cohort members. As the senior centurion, Dakota filled me in on the rules and regulations of the job and informed me of gladiator games that would be taking place at the coliseum in New Rome this afternoon. **

"How do these games proceed?"

"We get volunteers," Dakota explained. "Each volunteer is reviewed before the Senate and then they are sent out into the arena to fight monsters we have locked up in the dungeons. Once there aren't anymore monsters to face, any remaining volunteers that haven't surrendered or killed face the other volunteers until one remains standing."
"What does the winner get?" I asked.

"A medallion of honor, a hundred denarii, and first choice duties and bathhouse privileges for the Cohort they are in," he answered. He let out a wistful sigh.

That didn't sound too bad. "Who's going to represent the Fifth?"

"Who knows?" he said, "Jason won us the last game, but since he's a previous victor, he isn't allowed to volunteer again."

I nodded in reply. That made sense. "How often are these games?"

"We have them twice a year. We're having this one before the Aramilustrium tomorrow, and with what's going on, my guess is that the Senate wants to get everyone's spirits up."

"Why do they need to do that?" I wondered.

Dakota flickered his eyes to his surroundings, like he was afraid that someone would overhear. We were walking outside the barracks, and I only noticed a couple Lares. He whispered, "I don't know if anyone's told you this, but you chose a really bad time to show up."

"Why?"

"Months back, Octavian managed to uncover some new prophecies in his stuffing," he began. "I'm not sure what it was about, but it definitely put Jason and Reyna on edge, and trust me, it takes a lot to shake those two up, so whatever Octavian said must have been really bad."

I agreed. Jason had expressed his uneasiness after my questioning yesterday. "Do you have an idea what it's about?"

"I can't be sure, but whatever Octavian said led to more patrols, more war games, extended training hours, and lately, Octavian's rarely seen outside the auguries. The Senators are getting more hush-hush, and the Lares are fidgety. Next thing you know, we're hearing reports of Titans breaking free from their prisons, and Legionnaires going missing."

My face became grim. This situation was exactly the same as the one Camp Half Blood's been facing for years. "You guys are preparing for war."

"Yeah," Dakota said. "Camp Jupiter will be going to war for the first time in centuries."

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When I was trying to enter New Rome, I ran into trouble with a statue.

"No weapons are allowed to cross the Pomerian Line!" the god of boundaries, Terminus, shouted at me. "You cannot pass!" The little girl, Julia, was beside the statue god, guarding a large satchel of deposited weapons. Gwen and Bobby were behind me, wondering what was going on.

I was indignant. "I have no weapons on me! The girl already took my bow and arrows, and for the first time, I even willingly parted with my daggers! What more do you want?!"

"Don't think you can fool me!" Terminus growled. "I know what gifts have been bestowed upon you, boy, and I'll say it again: you shall not pass!"

That was a poor reenactment of Gandalf.
"Gifts?" I said with mock innocence. "What gifts? I don't see any gifts I have on me. Why don't you point them out for me, Lord Terminus?"

Behind me, I heard Bobby stifle a gasp as I apparently hit Terminus' sore spot, and Gwen was already calling for someone as Terminus glared at me with his stony eyes. "Nobody likes a smart ass, boy, and if I had my arms on me, by the gods I would be tossing you into the Little Tiber with them!"

Jason, followed by Gwen, came up from behind me. "Lord Terminus, why won't you let Hadrian through?"

"Ah, praetor," Terminus greeted. "Finally someone here who knows respect." I gave a snort. "This cretin is obstructing my rules and has insulted me beyond reproach!"

"I apologize on Hadrian's behalf, Lord Terminus," Jason said, "but Hadrian's only staying for a short while before he has to leave us, and he has already handed over his weapons. Can't you let him pass this once?"

Terminus laughed obnoxiously, like he knew something Jason didn't. "Handed over his weapons, you say? Don't let this brat's appearance deceive you, praetor. The boy is a weapon!"

My eyes saw red. "You piece of...!" Jason lifted a hand to interrupt my insult, and gave me a stern look that demanded my silence. I unwillingly complied.

"Is there no other way around this?" Jason said.

Terminus was obstinate. "No, praetor. My rule is final: Hadrian Chase isn't ever allowed to cross the Pomerian Line. Not under my watch!"

His final verdict slammed into me like a bag of bricks. I gritted my teeth, and clenched my hands tightly. I wasn't allowed in. I was never going to see New Rome, the coliseum, nor the beautiful valley I saw when I arrived with Mercury. Worst of all, there was nothing I could do about it.

It wasn't fair, and the god knew it. Terminus had just become my second least favorite deity, and that smug, triumphant smirk of his made me want to summon a jackhammer. Jason slumped his shoulders slightly, and his face was pitiful as he turned my way.

He started, "Hadrian..."

"I don't want to hear it," I interrupted. I didn't know if I masked my bitterness well enough. "Can I have my weapons back?"

Julia walked forward with the satchel, and quickly took my weapons back. I stepped aside to let the others through as I slung my quiver over my shoulder, and tied my daggers beside me. After a couple words with Terminus, Jason came over.

"What do you want, Jason?" I mumbled, not in the mood for talk.

Jason hesitated. "I know you were really eager to come see the game, and if you would like, I can come by personally to tell you my detailed account."

I forced a smile. "Thanks, Jason. I would like that."

"Take some time off," he suggested. "Spend some more time in the Roman bathhouses, or check out some of the temples and the Field of Mars. I'm sure you'll find something you haven't seen yet. You
can ask the patrol guards to tell you the way."

"Sure," I murmured. It wasn't like I had much of a choice. While everyone else got to enjoy the luxuries of New Rome, I was barred out from all the fun. I missed Camp Half Blood already. Even Walt's place was looking to be a hundred times better than this. I walked away from the crowd, and down the Via Praetoria.

*You want to leave already?* Seth said. *You were so excited to be here too.*

*That was before I met racist gods."

*Racist?* Seth questioned.

*Terminus knows what we are, Seth.* I said. *He called us a WEAPON. He knows we're not a demigod or legacy, and used that against us. He made me look like a fool in front of Jason, Gwen, Bobby, and everyone else who was there!* I sat down on the side of the road, my knees bent in front of me. *I'm not welcomed here.*

Seth sounded sincere. *Hunter, that's just Terminus being a bastard. You are welcomed here, okay? You get along with Gwen, Bobby, and Dakota, don't you? Even Jason's being courteous. It's only your second day here, and you only get to enjoy Camp Jupiter for three more days. Savor it while it lasts.*

*It still isn't fair,* I thought sourly.

*We get what we get,* he said. *Personally, I would like to see the Field of Mars, and maybe check out the Roman bathhouses again. They have nice saunas.*

I smiled, feeling better. *You sure know how to encourage people, Seth.*

*I try.*

I decided to follow Seth's suggestion, and walked off the Via Praetoria and towards the Field of Mars. The field was barren and there were partially built forts manned at all sides. I explored a couple of the forts, checking out how they worked, and tried to imagine the war games that took place here. After a while, when I crawled out of another fort, my sharp hearing could pick up the sound of cheering that resonated from the coliseum. I ignored the noise the best I could as I scavenged the next fort.

Eventually, I got bored and decided to visit Temple Hill.

I walked down the same path Jason had shown me when we visited Octavian. The Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus towered above all others, and I also noted the majesty and elegance of the Temple of Bellona and the Temple of Mars Ultor. There was no one in sight, except the numerous Lares that still mingled about.

I continued to search through the numerous temples, statues, and altars until I found what I was looking for. Right beside the gold Temple of Apollo, there stood a small marble altar of Diana. It looked bare and modest compared to her brother's temple, but at least it was better than the shack dedicated in Neptune's honor. I made my way there immediately to pay my respects, and at my silent urging, I summoned a wrapped up box of food I had prepared before my trip to the Wolf House. It was originally meant for me when I returned, but I felt a change of plans was in order.

"*Lady Diana,*" I said without hesitance, for I did not fear of anyone overhearing me. "*Please accept my offering. It isn't much, but I'll be sure to come by again tomorrow. If you are watching...please,
grant me guidance in this unknown place."

I set down the wrapped box onto the offering bowl, and after some pondering, I looked away and left the altar. A cool wind swept by, causing me to shiver slightly before I summoned a light navy jacket to put on. No sooner was I about to leave Temple Hill that I heard soft munching noises. I turned my head, and my eyes widened in anger when I saw a bent hooded figure eating the food I had offered!

"You thief!" I shouted, running back instantly. My mind was blinded by an intense rage as I quickly pulled out Nightwalker to deal with this food burglar. The figure's face was partially obscured as he or she looked up. I saw the box opened and a bitten casserole. I pointed my dagger at the thief's head.

"Drop it or I'll slash you where you stand!" I threatened.

"On what charge?" the figure, whose feminine voice sounded oddly familiar, replied. "This food is rightfully mine."

"Yours?" I said, and then I realized what she meant. I took a couple steps back as the figure set the food down and stood up. She turned around, allowing me to see her light, elegant face. There was a band of silver on her forehead, her auburn hair was curled at the ends and hanged loosely over her shoulders to her chest. Her silver eyes narrowed, noticing my agitation.

I struggled to find the right words. "I...I didn't...y-you're..."

The goddess crossed her cloaked arms. "A thief?"

I looked down sheepishly, and quickly drew back my weapon. My head was bowed. "N-no..."

"Quit your stuttering," she scolded. "Lift your head up proudly. You're not a beggar are you?" I shook my head. "Then demonstrate a manner befitting a true Roman of the Legion." I nodded quickly, and straightened myself out at once. She looked pleased. "Now, let's start again: greet me the way you should've done, child."

I gave a bow, a fist over my heart, and smiled. "Hello, mother."

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Chapter End Notes

* It was really hard finding any differences between Artemis and Diana since the same myths applied to each. I found sources that lacked any mention of Diana being a goddess of childbirth, and if this happened to be inaccurate, then I'm changing it in favor of distinguishing Seth from Hunter.

** On the Camp Jupiter map, there is a coliseum in New Rome. Riordan never went into much detail on what the coliseum is used for, but I figured that Romans decided to follow tradition of holding gladiator games with monsters instead of regular animals.
Hello, mother.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe.

Diana was here. She was actually here. She was talking to me, and eating my food. I never imagined that she would come see me this early. When it was appropriate, I finally lifted my head, and I saw her silver eyes gaze down at me. She had her eyes narrowed, like she couldn't decide what she thought of me. I noticed small braids in her hair, and there were small silvery pins that matched her elegant crown. Her light face seemed to illuminate under the shadows of her hood. She was ethereal, and her posture displayed a certain grace not seen in Artemis.

"Child," Diana started, waiting for me to speak.

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to snap out of my stupor. "Mother, I...it's an honor to meet you at last." I gave a hasty bow, preventing her from seeing my red face.

Why did you come? Why are you here?!

"I apologize for my rash actions earlier," I said immediately, my head lowered still. "I didn't mean to accuse you of thievery, and I hope the food is to your liking..."

Diana looked down at the boxed lunch, her gaze contemplative. "It will suffice." As I stood back up, I noticed a silver light emanate from her hand, and the boxed food disappeared, leaving only silver sparks behind. "Your actions were uncalled for, not to mention it was foolhardy and childish. I expected better from you, Hunter."

"It won't happen again," I stated.

"Indeed it won't," she agreed, and her eyes narrowed further. She looked conflicted. "Hunter...are you really my child?"

"I'm Roman just like you are, and I have a Greek aspect who is the heir of Artemis," I pointed out. "Wouldn't that make you my mother?"

"It appears so," Diana muttered, looking down at her crossed arms. "It was never my intention to have a male heir. When my counterpart told me about you, I knew I had to meet you myself."

"And?"

"Seth Hunter was always meant to be Greek," Diana replied. "He belongs to Artemis, and Artemis alone. You were her responsibility. I was never going to get involved with you, but now..." She lifted a hand to massage her temple and sighed. "To be frank, I don't know what to do with you."

This was...awkward. Despite what I had claimed before, I didn't know for certain how Diana and I would turn out. She could have ignored me, which I would have been fine with, or she could have been repulsed. If she was, it would have been completely expected on my part. It's a stretch to say that Diana was 'fine' with me, since she clearly wasn't. It was like in one of those TV shows, when a lost unknown child was reunited with a parent.
"Well," I started. "Maybe you could tell me how you feel about me? Do you find me tolerable? Annoying? Bothersome, perhaps?"

"I can't say much about you," Diana said, "but your counterpart, Seth—he is...acceptable. He's independent, and respects authority. That's admirable."

I nodded solemnly, but her words troubled me. "I agree with you, mother, but..."

"But what?"

"Seth's also me, you know?" I said quietly. "How can you say that he's acceptable and not say the same for me?"

Diana looked baffled. "You also identify as your counterpart?"

"Yes," I said. "I may not be him now, but in essence, we are one person. One entity. Is it not the same for you?"

"I may have been Artemis once," she said, "but that name no longer holds any meaning to me. Artemis and I have a similar history, so similar that people often mistake her realms as one of mine. Do you know that I was originally a hunting goddess?"

I nodded. "I know."

"I was given control over the hunt, maidens, and everything that dwelled in the wild," Diana recalled wistfully. "It was so much simpler, so much more enjoyable. But those Romans decided to lay off Helios and Selene and give me the moon. It's a nice chariot, and the responsibility does get me more sacrifices, but at what cost? I rarely have time for myself and my hunters, and then that whole 'childbirth package' that people still mistake me for having?" She gave a snort. "I'm not into that."

"But I read how the Roman ladies relied on you during pregnancy," I said. "You still helped them."

"That was Artemis," Diana admitted. "I couldn't say no when a young maiden in labor pleads for my aid. She lent her power to me."

"Do you still cooperate with her?"

"We've reached a compromise," she answered, "but our cooperation, no matter how good, wouldn't make me say that I'm Artemis, just like how Artemis wouldn't say she's me. For you to do so is odd."

I shrugged. "That's just the way I am, mother. I live to defy expectation."

"So I've heard," Diana murmured. She walked away from her altar and stepped onto the main road, her silver cloak shimmering like liquid silver as she moved. I took care to match her pace, and made sure not to step on her cloak as I walked behind her. Without looking back, she asked, "What do you want with me, Hunter?"

"What do you mean, mother?"

"Why do you offer me sacrifices? What took you this long to surface? Why are you only starting to make your move?" Diana questioned. "I know you said that you only appeared because of Walt Forger, but I don't buy that."

"Why not?"

"You also claimed that you were 'there' since the beginning," Diana reminded. "That's a

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"You also claimed that you were 'there' since the beginning," Diana reminded. "That's a
contradiction."

"I also said that I was only a presence," I corrected, careful. "I had no control over what Seth did and
did not do in the beginning because I lacked the physical means. This body wasn't under my control.
Walt unknowingly helped me rectify that."

"Body or not, you just confirmed that you had individual thought," Diana pointed out. "That alone,
is enough for you to take control if you wished to seize it."

I clenched my jaw, my eyes narrowing in suspicion. "What are you trying to prove?"

Diana lifted her chin. "My point, is that you are one talented liar, and it won't be long before your so
called story falls short."

I hitched a breath, like something was caught in my throat. Her words slammed into me relentlessly,
and for a while, I couldn't find a proper refute. At first, I thought Diana was bluffing, but on a second
glance, I realized that she was serious. Her silver eyes bore into mine, watching and reading me...

What did she mean by that? Seth asked. I nearly flinched. Seth was so quiet most of the time that his
silence made me forget he was listening.

Seth...I began. For once, I was nervous. I didn't know how Seth would react after this. Can you leave
this conversation to me?

You want me to leave you alone.

Yes.

I thought you said that you weren't going to hide anything from me, he said.

I gritted my teeth. I know I did, Seth, but this...please, I promise that I'll tell you everything, but I
can't do this NOW.

Does this have something to do with your own plans? Seth asked. The ones you refused to tell me
about?

Yes, I admitted. Again, Seth was silent, and I could sense him pondering through his options before
he finally replied.

Alright.

I was surprised by his easy compliance. I thought he would have protested. R-really?

Yeah, Seth said. You have your own secrets. You don't pry into my business, and you've been really
accommodating. You've also been...HONEST with me when I asked you those questions last night.
It's only fair that I return the favor.

I smiled briefly. I'm glad.

Those plans though, Seth muttered. Whatever they are...can you promise me that you'll tell me when
you're ready? I don't like being left in the dark for too long...

I will.

When I knew that Seth had left me alone, I finally focused on the person in front of me, who was
patiently waiting for my response. Despite having my well-kept secret forced out into the open, I
felt...relaxed.

I went straight to the point. "You suspected me from the start, didn't you?"

"Of course."

"Then why do you meet me? You could've ignored me, hated me, and I wouldn't mind."

"If you had wanted that, then why welcome me?" Diana said. "You know that giving me sacrifices would bring you to my attention."

"It was...necessary. I needed to meet you just once." I shook my head, placing a hand to my forehead. "It was my mistake. I should have known I couldn't get anything past a hunting goddess."

"I don't like being used, Hunter," Diana said narrowly. "I meant it when I said I didn't want to get involved."

"I apologize," I said, "but it was a decision that couldn't be avoided. Not for long."

"You kept this from your counterpart?" Diana said.

"I had to," I replied. "Seth wouldn't be the same if he knew. I wouldn't be the same."

"What are you planning to do, Hunter?" Diana said. "Keeping this secret...this could cost you dearly."

"I know, but it's a risk I'm willing to take," I murmured. "Are you going to tell her about me?"

"No," Diana said after a moment, "I don't think I should. It wouldn't feel right, coming from me."

I was relieved. "Thank you."

"Your aura is weak," Diana detected. "I knew I felt something strange when you came closer, and now I know why. By revealing yourself, you risk the chance of disappearing for good. You could have chosen to remain hidden, and live on."

"I could've, but I can no longer ignore what Seth is going through. If I didn't step in, then we would both fall into pieces yet again."

"You're very...'selfless'," Diana noted. "Especially when it concerns your counterpart. I see that Artemis wasn't wrong when she told me how you care about her child, but that also makes you very subservient." She said that word like it was vile.

I sighed. "I am not trying to be Seth's servant."

"Does Seth know that? He could be taking advantage of you," she said narrowly. "No child of mine should be seen groveling to one who's below their status."

"Seth isn't below me," I insisted, "and I'm not below him. We're equal. Partners."

"What has Seth done for you?" Diana countered. "What has he done for your sake? All I see is you obeying his wishes, putting his needs above your own. Or do you enjoy being stepped on?"

I clenched my teeth. "I do not like people intruding on my thoughts!"

"I'm not Artemis, Hunter," Diana interrupted. "Artemis may have promised her child not to look, but
I will do as I please whenever I feel the need to do so, and you still haven't answered me—what has Seth done for you? You don't owe him, or my counterpart, anything."

That's where you're wrong, I thought. I owe Seth a lot more than you think. He's the only one who deserves anything out of me.

"How I treat him is my business," I said sternly. "If you don't approve of Seth, then you wouldn't approve of me."

Diana's eyes narrowed. "Seth has his strengths and you have yours. It shouldn't matter what he is to you or what you are to him. You said you are his equal. Start acting like you are."

"It's not that simple, mother," I whispered. "We are equal in terms of power and ability, but Seth will always be the better man. It's how it should be."

"Only if you let him," Diana said, stepping forward. "You need to start taking charge, Hunter. You can't always rely on him. You can take back what's yours." I must have looked conflicted when I felt her hand placed on my cheek. I was startled by the gesture.

"Mother...?"

"Take heed of my words, child," Diana said softly. She looked sincere. "What you fear may come to pass sooner than you think. You need to prepare for it."

I lifted a hand to hold her wrist, taking her hand away from my face gently. I closed my eyes briefly before I spoke. "It won't happen, mother. I won't allow it."

"The Fates do not follow our conditions," Diana said, putting her hand down. "Think through what I said carefully, Hunter. It's up to you to make the decision."

She turned her wrist to free herself from my light grasp. Her figure started to shimmer, but before she went, I called, "will I see you again?"

Diana turned around, her silver eyes meeting mine before she gave a small smile. I forced myself to look away, and when I opened my eyes, Diana was gone. I hesitantly lifted my hand to touch my cheek, her hand had felt warm, and comforting. I gave a wistful sigh as I wrapped my arms around my ruffled coat and left Temple Hill behind.

-o-

As I settled into my bunk at the Fifth cohort barracks, Jason kept his word and told me a reiteration of what happened at the coliseum. I listened as he described the battles and proceedings in vivid detail, but I no longer cared if I had seen the gladiator games. I finally had my first meeting with my mother, and that was an alternative better than anything I could have asked for. Dakota had gone out to take a shower, and Bobby was sitting up on his bottom bunk.

"Who won the games?" I asked.

Jason looked troubled. "Bryce Lawrence."

"Who's he?"

"He's from the First Cohort, a legacy of Orcus, the god of punishment," he muttered. "I suggest you don't...interact with him too much. Avoid him if you can."
"Why?" I wondered. "Is he sketchy?"

"Sketchy doesn't cover it," Bobby joined in. "He's one of Octavian's loyal goons. I'm almost a hundred percent sure he had bribed or threatened the other contestants to win. But since there's no proof, we can't deny him the honor." Jason nodded reluctantly.

*Sounds like the kind of goon Octavian would like.* "What kind of person is he?"

"He's sadistic," Jason said in distaste. "A year ago, Reyna had him on a three-month probation after he dragged a bunch of dead animals behind a chariot."

"I remember that!" Bobby recalled. "He had called it his grand entrance. It was disgusting! I don't want to know what goes on in his sick mind."

"So he's dangerous," I concluded.

*That's a first,* Seth muttered. I had allowed him in after Diana left.

*What is?*

*You, calling someone else dangerous?* Seth remarked. *You're a sadist too. You're probably more dangerous than this Bryce guy.*

*That's different,* I thought back. *I'm not his kind of sadist.*

Seth was puzzled. *There are different kinds?*

*I don't inflict pain for self-pleasure,* I clarified. *When I cause pain, I do it with reason. I do it because I enjoy forcing my victims to pay for their crime, but I don't harm innocents: animals, children, bystanders. You see what I mean?*

*Yes...?*

*It's different for Bryce,* I thought. *He likes violence for the heck of it. The stereotypical sadist. He doesn't need a reason. That makes him unpredictable, and more dangerous.*

*So you're a sadist with STANDARDS?* Seth restated.

*More or less.*

Okay, Seth murmured, *but that still doesn't make you any less dangerous, or any saner.*

I would have laughed if I was alone. *Who doesn't like to see an enemy squirm?*

*Crazy bastard,* my other half muttered, sighing.

*Your one and only.*

"He's devil spawn," Bobby said coldly, like he held a grudge. I recalled that Bobby loves animals. "If he wasn't so rich, Jason would have kicked his ass out of Camp Jupiter and back to the Fields of Punishment, where he belongs."

"Bobby," Jason started. "Bryce won't ever come near the unicorns. If he comes within an inch of any of our stables, then its banishment."

"Good riddance," he muttered.
"I'll try to avoid him," I said, "but I've never met him. I don't know what he looks like."

"I can point him out during the Aramilustrium tomorrow," Bobby volunteered. "You won't miss him. He's got the face of a younger, dumber looking Hannibal Lector."

Before the grand ceremony, everyone was supposed to be dressed in white togas.

"Is this necessary?" I grumbled, struggling to tie up the stinking bedsheets over my shoulders. "Way to go ancient..."

"It's only for special occasions," Dakota said. He had a large centurion badge pinned on one shoulder. "You can take it off once the Aramilustrium is over."

"Still, why do we need to dress up so nice when we're cleaning weapons? We'll get them dirty." I pointed out.

Dakota shrugged. "It's tradition."

I rolled my eyes. "I should have guessed." When I finally adjusted it right, I turned around to face a mirror, and winced.

_Looking good, Hunter_, I heard Seth snicker.

_I look like Plato's drag queen_, I moaned. _Roman togas are shit._

Seth gave a rare laugh. _I don't know, Hunter. I think the toga makes us look...proper. Stately._

I made a face. "Hades no! Are you out of your mind?"

_No, I'm in it._ Seth deadpanned.

"Ha-ha, nice one," I said. "Seriously, your fashion sense needs work. Not to mention your self-esteem-that sucks."

Seth sounded tense. _Can we not talk about this?_ "No," I decided. "We're going to talk about it. I'm tired of having us look like a broke kid from the eighties. You need to take care of our appearance more."

_There's nothing wrong with how I dress!_ "Oh, so having a bird-nest hairstyle while wearing size XXL or shaggy hand-me-downs is the new fad?"

I could feel his embarrassment. _My hair isn't always a 'bird's nest', and mind you, it's size L! Not XXL! You make my clothes sound like a tent!_

I snorted. _Minor details._

_They're comfortable! They FIT me. Would you rather be wearing skimpy, tight 'fashion clothes' or a nice worn hoodie and jeans?_ "That's unfair, Seth, and I'm not asking you to become America's next top model—I just need you to wear clothes that really fit us. Clothes that make us look good."
"But I do! He protested. I don't see how the way I dress is any concern to y-!

"Seth," I interrupted. "I'm not trying to be an asshole, but face it: Where we're going next...presentation is everything. I don't want to risk having them look down on us because of how we look."

There was a tense silence. I stared at my reflection, seeing and not seeing what's there. My face and posture suggested a sense of tranquility, but if I had stared harder, I would have noticed how my silver eyes were unfocused, like they were in turmoil.

At last, Seth spoke, I understand. To be honest, I almost forgot about it.

"Never forget," I said sternly. I may have sounded harsh, but Seth needed to know that we couldn't afford to be complacent. "We need to stay on top of things. Don't forget why we are going through this. Our time with Walt and Lynetta is temporary, and will soon come to an end."

I know, he answered. But let's also make the best of the time we have left.

"Agreed," I stated, and then, I heard someone entering the hall and coming towards the room I was in. I adjusted the bedsheet properly when I saw Bobby's face in the mirror.

"Are you kidding me? The ceremony's about to start! What were you doing, taking so long?"

I smiled and followed Bobby out of the room. "Nothing, just talking to myself."

-o-

I hate trumpets.

They were loud and obnoxious, and the shouting and parading and cheering didn't help either. I forced myself to tune out the noise, my ears dangerously close to being tone-deaf. I was among the crowd, holding an old rusted shield that was half my height, and the cold chilly wind ruffled my toga and flicked my hair into my eyes, making me irritable. Each Cohort was lined up into five rows, single-file, before depositing their assigned weapon into this large steamy pool. I had already been holding this large, useless shield for the past three hours before the Fifth Cohort was finally called up.

I felt my arms strain from dragging the shield forward one step at a time. I looked up and saw Octavian and other Romans dressed in similar togas with flower garlands around their necks. Each time an inventory item (a shield, sword, spear, et cetera) was dropped into the pool for purification, there would be a round of trumpet blowing.

When I finally dropped my shield into the boiling pool, my body finally relaxed and I wiped sweat from my forehead when it was appropriate to do so. My aching legs were relieved when I sat down on the benches beside Bobby and Dakota. There were still a couple more weapons that needed to be purified.

I felt Bobby tap me on the shoulder. "What?"

He leaned close, pointed a finger towards the First Cohort, and whispered, "The guy talking to the tall dude with a helmet. That's Bryce Lawrence. Do you see him?"

I focused on where he was pointing and my sharp eyes saw a dark brown hair teen. The first thing I noticed was the scars. He had a series of minor scars around his neck and arms, like he had a fight with rodents. His aura was above average for a legacy, and it felt...deadly, malevolent. He had finished chatting with another Roman, who suddenly looked repulsed, and when he smiled, his green
eyes contained a malicious glee.

"You weren't kidding," I muttered. "This guy is..."

"...a sick bastard," Bobby finished. "I'm glad you agree. Try to avoid him while you're here."

I nodded, but I couldn't help but wonder what this Bryce's story was. Despite what his lineage suggested, I knew sadism wasn't innate. I could only guess how he got his current reputation since I planned on avoiding him and the rest of Octavian's goon squad. I needed to maintain a low profile, and with Jason (and probably Reyna and Octavian) being suspicious of me, it was best I didn't hang out with too many people.

When the last of the inventory weapons were finally dumped in for purification, there was another long round of trumpeting. I thought they were wrapping things up and getting the party started, but then I saw yet another group. They were dressed differently: Each had on different sashes and a gold medallion around their necks. The stuff they were carrying were wrapped tightly with fine cloth. The crowd seemed to grow quieter as the group approached the ritual pool.

I stifled a groan. How many more weapons do they need to clean?

"Our artifacts and relics," Bobby said. "We always save those for last."

"Are they all that's left?"

"Yup," Bobby said, and then he smirked, "just hold on a bit. We'll get out of here soon and get to the fun stuff."

I saw Octavian take an item from the stage and carefully took off the cloth. I had to squint my eyes to see the shiny object. When the glare resided, I saw that it was a dagger. The six inch blade was made of Stygian Iron, its hilt adorned with rubies and black onyx.

Octavian proclaimed, "Behold, the dagger of the traitor, Marcus Junius Brutus! The cursed weapon that ended the Great Julius Caesar on the eyes of March!" There was a loud round of applause before Octavian placed the weapon into the cleansing pool.

I blinked in surprise. "Is that really Brutus' dagger?"

"Who knows?" Dakota answered. "We may have a lot of 'rare' artifacts, but only a few are legitimate. Others are kept for their ornamentation, but I do think that dagger is authentic."

"I see," I murmured. I sat up a little straighter. Maybe this part was worth my attention.

Another item was revealed. It was a...hand mirror?

"The mirror, of Julia the Younger, mother of Emperor Nero!" Octavian said, before the item is dropped into the pool.

Dakota cracked a smile. "You see what I mean?"

My attention vanished. "I thought we were only doing weapons? Why are household items being cleaned too?"

"We clean whatever is in our inventory," Bobby corrected. "That includes weapons, mirrors, anything. If someone could prove that Emperor so and so had this really awesome moldy-looking toothbrush—we'd be cleaning that too."*
"You're not serious," I said. Bobby shrugged.

For the next hour, I sat there impatiently as each item was announced and dropped into the pool. The trumpets and applause still got on my nerves, and my legs were now aching from sitting too long. Apparently, Emperor Nero had a collection of terracotta jars, Augustus had a favorite gold goblet, and Hadrian had worn a silver and gold medallion for luck. I had to restrain myself from scoffing out loud many times, and I wasn't the only one. They also had artifacts that weren't of Roman origin. I had to lift a hand to cover my laughter when Octavian announced they had Cleopatra's cat hairbrush.

They were nearing the end, and I was bored to death. I was also on the verge of snoozing if it weren't for the cramped space. However, when the last item was lifted up to Octavian, who looked like he wanted to get this ceremony over with, I sensed a godly presence. I jolted awake, wondering why I was sensing it when no god was present, and stared intently as Octavian carefully unveiled the artifact...

It was a six foot long celestial bronze spear. Its deadly tip was laced with gold edges, and it wasn't highly decorated. There was a tattered red ribbon tied at the end to indicate ownership, and my sharp eyes could see the delicate carved...Greek letters?

Even Octavian smiled when he held the spear up. "Behold our most treasured artifact—the Spear of Diomedes, the god-piercer!"

I struggled to hear myself think as a round of applause followed instantly. Diomedes was a Greek war hero. He had served under Achilles during the Trojan War before he became King of Argos. According to the myths, Diomedes was blessed with Athena's strength and courage, and was a warrior rivaled by none but his leader, Achilles. He had been about to kill Aeneas, son of Aphrodite, before said goddess interfered and tried to carry Aeneas away. Long story short, Diomedes had struck Aphrodite's wrist, leaving her incapacitated. The bitch had whined about it, but the other gods only made fun of her and made light of her matter. He also managed to gut Ares with the same spear with Athena's help.

For harming the bitch alone, Diomedes had quickly made his way on my top three list of favorite heroes. I could tell that the spear was the real thing because the spear, though polished, was stained with Ichor. I could sense Aphrodite and Ares' signatures on that weapon, and that was enough veracity for me. I licked my lips in anticipation, my eyes drank in the sight of that valuable spear before it was dipped into the pool.

I wanted that weapon.

Hunter, Seth warned.

What? I protested. The spear doesn't even belong here with the Romans! It's Greek in origin!

That doesn't give you the right to take it! Seth protested.

Who cares about rights? I dismissed. My mind was only focused on my new target. That spear is rusting away in the dust! I'd be doing it a favor by taking it out of its miserable state.

What do you even want with that spear?! We already have enough weapons at our disposal. We don't need another-!

Seth, Seth, Seth, I admonished. You don't get it do you? That weapon has harmed TWO gods. Two Olympians, and one of them was Aphrodite! How many other weapons in history has ever incapacitated Olympians?
Seth was stubborn. Admit it- you want that weapon because you're a Diomedes fanboy.

So what if I am?

WE DON'T NEED IT. Seth said sternly. Don't even think about stealing it. This spear will remain here with the Romans, as it has always been. We can't draw a scene. Mercury will have our hides if he found out!

Actually, I interrupted. I think Mercury would approve of our quest. He is the god of thieves.

That's probably what Luke thought too, Seth muttered. Look where that got him?

Luke...was stealing from ZEUS and HADES. I pointed out. He was a mind-controlled idiot for messing with the gods' stuff. But our situation is different—we're only taking something that doesn't even belong here. If Diomedes were alive, he would approve.

Seth would have none of it. You are NOT taking that spear!

I clenched my teeth hard. Seth was starting to get on my nerves. I'll make sure the Romans don't find out. You'd be fine with that, wouldn't you?

I knew my words were having effect when I felt his hesitation. It still doesn't make it right, and that spear doesn't belong to us.

It doesn't belong to the Romans either, I said back. Its true owner has already passed on, and didn't you sense that aura earlier? That weapon is BEGGING to be used again.

Weapons are inanimate.

Not all of them, I murmured darkly. Look, everyone will be at the party while the weapons are being stored in transit. I can locate that spear and make the swipe easily. Once that spear is in our hands, I can teleport it to our room at Walt's. We are leaving this camp tomorrow. We'll never be coming back to this place ever again, so if the Romans did suspect me, they wouldn't even know where to find us.

Seth sighed. Can I not change your mind?

Nope.

I could imagine him shaking his head. I have a bad feeling about this. Nothing can be this simple.

Nothing ever is, but if it means getting that spear in our possession...it will be well worth the risk.

When are you going to do this?

Tonight, of course, I said. The night is our friend. We have to make the swipe as early as possible to have the highest chance of success.

He was still skeptical. I don't think that spear was what Lupa had in mind when she sent us here.

Either way, we're going to get a new priceless weapon.

IF you manage to take it, Seth pointed out.

I smirked. Have a little faith! We've done things much harder than this. I WILL get that spear.
May the Fates have mercy, Seth muttered glumly.

Reyna analyzed the pile of papers in front of her. Her dark eyes scanned through its contents, relentlessly trying to commit the diagrams, plans, and schematics to memory. She was seated on a dark, cushioned chair behind her office desk. Her dogs, Aurum and Argentum, were silent as they guarded the entrance of one of the back rooms of the Principia. She brushed back a thin strand of dark hair and shifted in her seat. Her eyes were tired, but her mind was restless.

She looked up when Aurum and Argentum started barking. The door opened, and she saw Jason enter.

"Heed," she commanded, and her dogs were silenced and sat back down. "Jason, what brings you here?"

"Our scouts have brought back more news," Jason informed. "There are more sightings of monster activity at the coast."

"More?"

Jason nodded, grim. "Their numbers have doubled since last time. Reyna, we can't sit around and watch anymore. We need to do something."

"By something, you are suggesting we make the first move?"

"Yes," he said. "Monsters don't randomly team up and form armies. The Titans are going to ambush us. Octavian has warned us about this. Marcus has-!"

"Don't mention him," she interrupted. "Don't mention that traitor's name in front of me ever again, Jason." She almost regretted her harsh tone when she saw Jason's startled gaze. Even though they were of the same position, Reyna had seniority, and Jason respected that.

"I'm sorry," he said later, "look, I came here not to suggest open-war, but something that will prove just as devastating."

Reyna narrowed her eyes. "I'm listening."

"I'll form a small group, preferably six members, including me. We'll sneak into enemy territory, set off the bombs to destroy their supplies and hopefully, most of their forces. We'll take the advantage while we still have it. The monsters will be forced to regroup, and that will give us more time to prepare, and give us the offense position."

"And if this plan succeeds," she started, "what then? The traitors won't sit lightly on this, and do we even know where their main base is at? If you target one of the smaller ones, then we will be signing our own death certificates."

Jason hesitated, thinking it through carefully, before his face lit up. "Hadrian."

"What about him?"

"Octavian read his augury, and tells me that Hadrian will 'lead the trail'. I think Hadrian knows where the main base is."

Reyna frowned, "if he knew that, why didn't he say anything?"
"I...I don't know," Jason muttered. "It's just a hunch. Maybe he knows something different."

"Perhaps," Reyna conceded, "but I do not trust Hadrian Chase. His background is...sketchy. If it turns out that he does know where the main base is, then it's more likely that he's one of those traitors."

"I don't think so," Jason said. "He came here with Lord Mercury, and Mercury seems to trust him. I'm certain he's on our side."

"But do you trust him, Jason?" Reyna countered. "We cannot risk any failure. Hadrian has no obligations to serve Camp Jupiter. He is prepared to leave tomorrow night. We can't depend on-!"

Her dogs interrupted her. Both praetors turned to see Octavian enter with raised arms.

"Octavian," Jason said narrowly. "Why are you here this late?"

"I'm here to give Reyna her report," Octavian sneered, "as it is custom for augurs to do so. It took a little longer to decipher than usual. You mind calling off your dogs, Reyna?"

Reyna toyed with the idea of letting her dogs intimidate Octavian further, but reluctantly called them off. "You may proceed, Octavian."

"Well, it's just the usual really, the sun will darken! The storms will gather before the appointed day! What's more interesting, is how Hadrian Chase is tied in with all this."

"Hadrian?" Jason said in disbelief.

Hadrian Chase. Why did everything suddenly involve him? He was a wanderer with a hidden slate. Mercury had regarded him highly, and he was already claimed by Apollo. His abilities were...unknown, but he had mentioned he was skilled at archery, just like any other child of Apollo. What made him so different? Was Jason right in requesting his help? Was he a threat to Camp Jupiter?

Who are you, Hadrian? She thought. Are you our friend? Or our foe?

What Octavian said next, blew her mind away.

"...Hadrian can be trusted."

Like her, Jason was also taken aback. Octavian was the least trusting Roman she could think of. For him to vouch for someone willingly was unheard of.

Jason asked, "How can you be so sure?"

"The auguries have told me," Octavian said confidently, "and I may have heard some other things, but that's beside the point. What I do know is that Hadrian is essential in this time of crisis, and for once, I agree with Jason on allowing Hadrian to join the group."

Jason glared at him accusingly. "You were eavesdropping."

"You left the door open," he dismissed, rolling his eyes. "Anyone could have overheard by accident. How very careless, praetor."

"Enough!" Reyna cut in before her partner did something he'd regret. Jason looked like he was on the verge of strangling Octavian, and carefully restrained himself again. "Octavian, what did the auguries tell you? Why should Hadrian be assigned on the team?"
Octavian smiled, like he knew something she didn’t. "Hadrian is certainly...something else. He's our trump card, praetor. You’d be foolish not to put him on."

"You didn't answer me," she said, frustrated. "Why should he be put on?"

"I think I know," Jason said, "Terminus had denied Hadrian entry to New Rome yesterday."

This was news. "Why?"

"Apparently, Terminus got offended by Hadrian's insults, and he had accused him of... 'being a weapon'? I don't quite understand what Lord Terminus had meant, but Hadrian is forever barred from entering New Rome."

Reyna was confused. Hadrian, a weapon? "Did you question Terminus about this?"

Jason nodded. "Yes, but he refused to clarify. He had said it was out of his jurisdiction."

Reyna was bewildered. What was going on here? Now, it wasn’t a question of who Hadrian Chase was, but what he was. First, it was Mercury, and now Terminus? The gods clearly knew what was going on, and none of them were willing to disclose the details. Hadrian had also denied them more information on himself during questioning, and even Octavian was giving him support. One thing was certain:

Hadrian Chase was dangerous.

"That's something new," Octavian had remarked. "There's just this one problem—your little mission, Jason, will take a minimum of two days to complete. One to make the trip, and another to get back. Preparations will take a whole afternoon. Hadrian is leaving tomorrow night. How will you get him to stay long enough to help you?"

"That's true," Reyna said. "There wouldn't be enough time, and Mercury specifically instructed us to let him stay for only five days."

Jason smiled. He had thought about this. "Mercury told us that Hadrian can stay in Camp Jupiter for five days. The mission will be taking place outside the camp." Octavian looked amused.

"Not bad, Grace," he said grudgingly. "But how will you convince Hadrian to join you?"

"Uh... It's for the good of the camp?"

Octavian snorted. "You need to do better than that. Would Hadrian feel complied to risk his life for people he’d met for only five days? No! He wouldn't give a shit. He'd leave and we may never meet him again."

... and we may never get our answers echoed in each of their minds.

"I assume you have a better idea?" Reyna finally asked.

The augur smiled wickedly. "Leave that to me."

-o-

Chapter End Notes
*Romans were very keen on their oral hygiene, and did use toothbrushes, but their toothbrushes were made very differently from ours.
It isn't too late to turn back, I heard my counterpart say.

"Relax your goody two shoes, Seth," I said. It was soon dusk, and I was back at Temple Hill, crouching down beside a pedestal dedicated to one of the gods. I had changed out of the ridiculous toga and into dark clothing, with gloves and combat boots I had teleported from Walt's. "Just leave it to me. It'll be over soon enough."

Despite my attempts to calm him, Seth was resistant. What if someone catches us?!

I rolled my eyes, and smirked. Who do you think I am, Seth? I'm the heir of Diana, goddess of the hunt! It's NOT in my nature to get caught.

It's also in your nature to make pompous claims, Seth mumbled.

What was that? I growled.

Seth only muttered other inaudible things and sighed.

I straightened up, my back leaning against a concrete wall. I was standing beside yet another Temple of Jupiter. I turned and noticed two guards standing in front of the armory. One held a gladius, and the other a spatha, a straight short sword, tied to his waist. Both of them wore helmets and the standard armor. The two of them were conversing, not noticing how I was moving closer and closer. I heard some of their conversation as I approached:

"...Agnes?!” one of the guys exclaimed. "No way, dude. She's like way out of your league!"

"Shh! Not so loud!" his companion hissed. "Come on, man, I need tips! You gotta help me out here!"

"Hey, I know a hopeless case when I see one," he said, sticking his gladius into the ground in favor of raising both hands freely, "and your case is hopeless."

"I just need to get her attention somehow," the guy insisted. "She's all I ever dream of! Agnes..." He let out a blissful sigh. "...she's the epitome of beauty, courage, and...!"

"...and now you're a hopeless and love-struck idiot," his friend concluded.

"I agree," I said. I had already snuck up behind the love-struck fool and promptly knocked him out with a punch to the jaw, causing Seth to cringe in sympathy. The other guy reacted, but before he could even grab his gladius, I had stepped over his buddy and landed a roundhouse kick at the other guy's face. They were both knocked out cold.

I crouched down and started to drag each of them by the arms and dumped their unconscious bodies inside one of the temples. I was sure neither of them saw my face clearly, but even if that second guy did, my kick should knock the memory out of him.

"Sweet dreams, fellas," I smirked, closing the double doors and locking them with a spare padlock left at the side. Gotta love the Romans for their efficiency, and their rituals. Everyone was still out
party ing at New Rome or pigging out in the cafeteria, leaving the armory with little to no defense.

I rubbed my hands together in anticipation, staring up at the armory with gleaming eyes. "Now...onto business."

After scrutinizing my surroundings carefully, I lightly stepped up to the front entrance. I grasped the handle and tugged. The door was locked. That was expected. I summoned one of my lock picks and after a few minutes of tweaking and shoving, the door sounded with a delightful click! Again, I looked around to check if anyone was in sight before I quietly made my way inside, shutting the door behind me.

My infrared eyes took in everything. Instead of the expected dust and grimy mold, the place was swept clean. The floor and ceiling were inlaid with ceramic tiles, and the walls were painted with mosaics. I noticed a large array of shields were lined up in rows on my left, and there were swords, spears, and javelins on my right, organized and ready for use. I walked down the long path, my silver eyes wandering about restlessly to detect any traps or sensors (in case they were going to use any modern stuff) and as expected, there weren't any. For once, I was glad the Romans were strict conservatives.

I went up a small flight of stairs, and entered another hall. Noticing the familiar cloth and glass cases, I knew I was in the right place. This section was more spacious. Most of the ancient relics were still covered up, and were set into a series of vertical rows, like a formal exhibit. There were others stacked in the corner that have yet to be sorted. I glanced at each of them casually, but I halted when I saw Brutus' dagger. Its uncovered blade was shorter and more curved than my pair of daggers, and up close, the adorned black dagger looked even more appealing...

*Move on, Hunter!* Seth said sternly.

*But we can start a collect-*!

*We're NOT having this discussion again!*

*Tch.* Very reluctantly, I sucked it up and left the dagger untouched. I kept walking forward carefully until my eyes spotted my target, set on a single white pedestal in its own private room.

The Spear of Diomedes remained cloaked and sat on metal arms. It was placed in the center of the room, and its hierarchal position made me nervous. The cloaked spear seemed to stare back at me defiantly, daring me to approach and take it off its resting place. I walked up to it until the spear was within arm's reach.

*What's stopping you?* Seth asked.

I bit my lower lip, thinking. *This is too much like Indiana Jones. Shiny valuable object looking all defenseless and shit? Too similar. Other than those two weak guards, there has been no surveillance or traps whatsoever. This spear is protected somehow. I can SENSE it.*

Seth thought about it. *Maybe the trap is still hidden from us? The spear IS covered still. Maybe something is underneath it?*

"Perhaps," I agreed, inspecting the thin cloth more closely. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Maybe there was a trigger hidden. "There are no sensors or invisible strings attached," I looked up briefly, "and no big rock to crush us either."

*Check the doors and entrances.* Seth suggested. *Maybe the 'trap' is about locking us in.*
I backed away from the spear, and scurried around for the next fifteen minutes analyzing the entrances and double doors. After patting down the walls and crevices, my gloved hand finally detected something. I smirked in triumph, recognizing the familiar insignia for Vulcan. We both knew what that meant.

I felt Seth’s relief. So there was something after all.

_I knew the Romans weren’t slackers_, I thought. I walked to the other side, and found an identical one. _These engraved lines that are connected here...now that I think about it, the tiles on the floor and ceiling resemble a coordinate grid, don’t they?_

Yeah, Seth muttered, figuring something out. _I think...Can you look up for a sec?_ I looked up. _Okay...yeah, these engravings are enchanted._

"Enchanted?" I echoed. "You sure about that?"

I could imagine Seth nodding. _This is Vulcan's work, no doubt about it, but I also think Hecate's involved with this too. That explains why you didn't notice this before, Hunter. The traps are MAGICAL, not mechanical. I'm only hypothesizing, but I believe that once the spear is removed, those engravings will activate and serve as a cage..."

"...that takes up the entire armory, locking the intruder inside." I finished. "Or it can be something far worse. Shit."

_There's only one way to go about this_, Seth said, thinking up a plan rapidly. _Remember what I did with Ares’ shield? It's too dangerous to trigger the trap up close, especially when we don't know what it does. We need to grab the spear at a safer distance._

"That's easy," I said. "We can use Nemesis' gift, can't we?"

Yes, except the spear is covered. Seth pointed out. _We need a good visual of the object in order to transport it. You need to take off the cloth, picture the spear's placement, and then transport it._

"So the hard part is getting rid of the cloth," I summarized. I felt Seth's confirmation. "Got it. Thanks for the input, but I'll handle everything else from here."

_You got a plan already?_ Seth said in disbelief. _You're not thinking of taking the cloth off while inside are you?_

I rolled my eyes. "Course not. I got something better." I walked back to where the spear sat, and summoned a silver arrow. I felt Seth's confusion before I forcibly bent the tip to create a hook. I carefully punctured one area of the cloth furthest away from the spear. I waited for a moment, and seeing how nothing happened, I continued. I gritted my teeth as I poured my energy into the arrow, making the other end longer, thinner, and more flexible while I walked back as far as I could while keeping the spear in my line of sight. I was only a few meters away from the double doors.

Seth understood. _You created a fishing line._

I smiled uneasily, feeling a bit worn out. "Let's see if it works."

With a simple tug, the cloth came off, revealing the Spear of Diomedes. I heard a loud rumbling noise as I stretched one arm out and transported the spear to my hand. The engraved lines glowed an eerie red, and I quickly made a mad dash to the double doors. I sidestepped when a large sharp stake suddenly planted itself in front of me. I looked up and wished I hadn’t: the engraved lines served as a dimensional portal, sending in numerous weapons to fall on intruders. I tumbled this way and that...
before I grasped the handle and pushed the doors open. The cool air greeted me as I rolled out of the armory portico, the double doors slamming shut automatically.

I laid down on the ground, holding my prize close as I panted. That was no cage. Whatever it was, I was never going back in there. Unfortunately, while I was busy recovering from my near death experience, someone had seen me tumble out of the armory...

"Well, well," an irritable voice said. "What do I have here?"

I forced myself up, and saw a dagger pointed at my throat. My eyes narrowed when I saw who it was.

"Octavian," I hissed.

The augur's eyes gleamed with malice as he looked down at my crouching figure. His eyes flickered at the spear I had in my hand. If I wasn't imagining things, Octavian looked like he was about to smile.

"A petty thief," Octavian sneered. "Is that why Mercury sent you, Chase? To steal from us?" He edged his ceremonial dagger closer to my jugular. "Drop the spear."

Reluctantly, I let go of my weapon, and Octavian moved to kick it out of my reach. His dagger still dangerously close to my neck. I was forced on my knees, and I raised both hands up.

I tried to stall as I thought of a plan. "What are you doing here?"

"I was heading back to the Temple of Jupiter until I received a notice that the armory had been broken into," Octavian said. "I was contemplating which fool would dare such an attempt and to my surprise, it was you."

"Surprising," I muttered. "So...what happens now?"

Octavian smirked. "What should happen, is that I turn you in and let Reyna and that incompetent Grace decide what your punishment should be. Thievery is never tolerated here, and it would be good to use an example every now and then. However...I think we can arrange something different."

I clenched my jaw tightly. I recognize a blackmail when I hear it. Octavian only smiled arrogantly at my 'forced' silence, pissing me off further.

"The praetors and I were just talking about you," Octavian said smugly. "Jason has come up with a plan to infiltrate the Titan's main base and wants you on his team."

Briefly, I was confused. Wasn't that sensitive information? Why was he telling me this so freely? What did he get out of it? What's his goal?

I decided to voice my concern. "So what? Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm telling you because I know how you think," he said. "You're new here. You're not tied down by any obligation to help us. You're prepared to leave the Legion by tomorrow, and from the look of things..." Octavian glanced at the spear briefly. "...you have no intention of ever coming back."

Frustrated, I bit the inside of my lip to prevent saying anything disastrous. I kept my eyes on his weapon, hovering too close for comfort.

"I want to propose a deal."
I frowned, instantly suspicious. "What sort of deal?"

"You want the Spear of Diomedes, and I want you to join Jason on his mission," he said, his dagger still pointed at my throat. "The deal is, if you agree to join Jason, then I'll sweep your crime under the rug. I won't report you to the praetors or the Senate. But if you want me to let you keep the spear, then I need you to do me some favors."

My eyes narrowed dangerously. "You want to use me."

"Yes."

"Why?" I questioned, thinking up another tactic. "What's the point in using an untrained rookie like me as your underling? You know I'm guaranteed to leave soon. I don't see how I can be 'useful' to you."

Octavian smirked. "Don't take me for a fool, Chase. I know who you are."

"Sure you do," I muttered.

"I know you are a petty thief and a liar," Octavian said. He lifted his dagger, and slowly dragged the blade lightly against my cheek. I didn't flinch, and I could tell that disappointed him. "I also know you are not a son of Apollo, but rather the heir of the Huntress. Am I right, son of Diana?"

My heart started to pound at the sudden revelation. I could feel paranoia spreading inside me, and I was tempted to choke the augur to death then and there, but controlled myself. If Octavian knew who I was, then I had to know how he knew, and most importantly, if he had passed the information to anyone else.

I continued my act. "Your brain must be pretty skewed if you think Lady Diana would have an heir."

"Oh, I didn't believe it at first either," Octavian said. "Not until I heard you talking to her."

"You..." my voice died in my throat. Panic settled in my paranoia, and my head started to pound. How much of the conversation did he hear?! Where was he when it happened? When I spoke with my mother, it was during the gladiator games...

*Octavian's rarely seen outside the auguries*, Dakota had said.

My mother and I had met in front of her altar, which was next to the Temple of Apollo, which was a couple meters away from the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the auguries. Octavian must have been inside the Temple instead of at the gladiator games. Dakota had never said it was mandatory for everyone to show up (like me) and I had assumed Octavian had been there instead. My assumptions were now proven wrong.

"I spend at least twelve hours at the auguries each day, reading hundreds if not thousands of partial or complete prophecies per week," Octavian confirmed. "Do you think your prophecy would have slip my notice, Chase?"

I glowered at him. "How much do you know?"

"Enough to know that you're either a threat or our trump card," Octavian said. "It's stated that you will bring about victory without fail, but it is for the side you support." He moved his dagger down and edged it closer to my neck. "Who do you support, Hadrian Chase?"
"Not you," I snarled. I had enough of his talk, and I was tired of being kept in this penitent position. Clearly, Octavian didn't know how to mind his own damn business, and he knew too much about me to be let off the hook. I didn't need to hear anything more to know he was a danger that needed to be eliminated.

At a sudden impulse, I reached up and grabbed his dagger by the blade, startling the augur. I felt the sharp edges dig deeper into my skin as Octavian tried to tug his weapon out of my hand, but it was tightly secured in my grasp. The only reason why my hand wasn't partially amputated by now was my regeneration. I could feel my cells trying to knit together continuously while the dagger slid across each layer of flesh. My left hand and arm was completely drenched in red.

By the time Octavian opted to let go of his weapon and defend himself, I had lunged upward, my other hand feeling a soft breeze before Dark Hacker appeared. I moved my left leg forward, intertwining it behind one of the augur's legs before tripping him. I saw a flash of fear in his eyes before I plunged my Stygian Iron dagger into his chest. Blood splattered onto my face and jacket as Octavian opened his mouth, releasing an inaudible scream.

I watched in cold silence as Octavian's eyes rolled back, life quickly seeping out of him as he lay still in the grass. I had just killed a person for the first time, and strangely, it didn't feel much different from killing a monster. I didn't feel any remorse or any regret. Instead, I felt relieved. I didn't need to worry about Octavian sprouting out secrets or any plans he might have had against me. No, the only obstacle I needed to worry about now was how to get rid of the corpse and any evidence that might tie this to me.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!

Oh, right. There was another obstacle, a more difficult one, and that was myself.

Very calmly, I answered, "I only did what was necessary."

When did KILLING someone become necessary? Seth demanded angrily.

"He knew too much," I said. "He already started to blackmail us. Who knows what else he would've done if I hadn't stopped him."

You didn't need to kill him! Seth insisted. Y-you could have stopped him another way! Knock him out! B-blackmail him to keep him silent! You didn't need to take his life!

I shook my head. "Octavian would never keep silent about this, and he was too much of a threat to be left to his own devices. I couldn't take that risk." I started to strip off my stained jacket and shirt, wiped my face with them, and threw the dirty clothes over Octavian. I shivered, the October air creating goosebumps on my arms before I quickly covered up.

You don't know that! Seth protested. You didn't even give him a chance to explain what he wanted from us! You can't base everything by your assumptions-!

I interrupted, "so you would rather I wait, and let our enemies get the upper hand?"

No, but-!

"Then, I don't see why you are so offended," I stated. "I took out the threat. I prevented Octavian from gaining more leverage over us. It's the most logical course of action."

Logical...Seth repeated. His voice sounded shaky. He struggled to form a response. Logic isn't always RIGHT, Hunter! Killing is NEVER the right thing to do!
"I know that," I said, "but Seth, I didn’t kill Octavian with bad intentions. I did it to preserve our well-being. It was more an act of self-defense rather than murder. Octavian did point his weapon at me, and he caused me harm." I lifted a hand to my cheek, the scars have closed up, but I could still feel the light abrasions before it smoothed out.

*Maybe at first, Seth relented, but it ceased to be defense when you decided to attack him! You could have just as easily immobilized him, but you CHOSE to murder Octavian instead.*

"Yes, I did make that choice," I admitted, and before Seth could respond, I continued, "but it was Octavian that forced my hand, Seth. If he hadn’t intervened tonight, pointed his weapon at me, and attempt to blackmail me into becoming his lap dog, then I might have let him go. If Octavian hadn’t revealed what he knew about our prophecy, I might have considered immobilization. The point is, Octavian was a dangerous busybody that would stop at nothing to gain more power. Almost everyone we’ve talked to has confirmed what kind of person Octavian was. You can berate me all you want, Seth, but Octavian is already dead and gone, and I will *not* regret putting an end to him."

I waited for Seth to respond, but there was only silence. I felt his frustration and anger before I sensed his presence disappearing. Seth hadn’t let this go. His moral obligations and stubbornness wouldn’t allow him to. However, he has yet to come up with a suitable counter-argument and likely went away to think of one. I wasn’t bothered. Rather, I eagerly anticipated our future debate.

I lifted my left arm, my severely injured hand only continued to limp around. I stared at my mangled hand, noticing the exposed skeleton and damaged nerves. My thumb had been dangling about dangerously before my regeneration snapped my thumb into place, causing me to wince. Feeling returned to the rest of my fingers as the wound slowly closed up, and the bleeding finally ceased flowing.

Once my left hand has recovered, I picked up Octavian and slung him over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He was a bit heavier than I thought, but no matter. Just when I was about to leave, my sharp eyes spotted the Spear of Diomedes lying on the ground.

I smiled, and willed the spear to me. I stared down at the weapon with adoration.

"I'll cherish you dearly," I said softly to the spear. "I did kill to have you, but for now, we must part."

Seconds later, my Spear of Diomedes vanished, and was currently on my bed in Massachusetts. Now that my new treasure was safe, I had to find a place to dump the trash and make it into my Fifth Cohort bunk without anyone noticing.

What an eventful evening.

-o-

The next day, Jason came by to speak with me.

I had just been forcefully yanked up by Bobby *and* Dakota, and the scent of cherry Kool-Aid on my tussled hair was so vibrant it wasn't even funny. After my little detour, I had crawled into bed around four am and had only two and a half hours of sleep, making me unbelievably cranky. I had finished taking a quick shower and changed into a set of clothes. While everyone prepared to leave for breakfast, I was polishing my dual daggers with a cloth outside the Fifth Cohort barracks. I looked up when I saw the praetor approach me.

"Morning, Jason," I greeted. "What's up?"

"Did Octavian speak with you?" Jason asked quietly.
I hesitated, recalling how Octavian had mentioned Jason's proposed mission and how the praetor had wanted me to join him. I thought about answering honestly, but stopped myself. Jason didn't know about Octavian's death, and it wouldn't take long for them to connect his disappearance to me if he knew I'd spoken to him last. With that in mind, I decided to feign ignorance.

"No, I don't think so," I lied. Jason frowned, not expecting that answer. "Why? Was there something he needed from me?"

"No..." Jason started muttering to himself.

"What is it?" I inquired.

"I was counting on Octavian to give you the details, but it doesn't matter," Jason dismissed. He stood up straighter as he addressed me. "I'm going to propose a mission to infiltrate the Titans at a private Senate meeting, and I'll need five others to join me."

"Okay," I said. "What does that have to do with me?"

"I...I want you to be one of the five," he said at last.

My eyes furrowed in thought. I had expected Jason to approach and ask me to join him. However, with all the stuff that happened with Octavian, the Spear of Diomedes, and my silent counterpart, Jason's mission was the last thing that came to mind. I didn't know whether I should join or not. Declining would mean that I leave Camp Jupiter behind, return to Walt and Lynetta, and finish my training with them before joining the Titans in Louisville. I also didn't want to be here when they realized Octavian has gone missing, but that factor shouldn't matter since the mission would take me outside the camp. I also desired the experience. I've never collaborated with other Romans before. This would likely be a one-time opportunity, and maybe another chance to test my abilities.

Since I was still weighing my options, I decided to ask questions to stall for time. "Why do you want me to join?"

"Your augury," Jason answered. I made a face. Really? When Jason noticed my look, he was sheepish. "I...I've been thinking that your coming here wasn't by chance, and with everything that's been happening out there, I thought you were sent to help us."

I remained skeptical. I was never one to take prophecies seriously, and I hate how our world is built to rely on them so much. I believe that each person is responsible for their own destiny. No matter what has been said about my future, I would be the only one to take control! I didn't need three damn hags or any teddy bear stuffing to determine my life. Thinking on it, the Fates likely expected me to hurry back and finish my training, and the thought of that made my stomach churn.

"What makes you think I'm here to help?" I questioned, crossing my arms. "Truthfully, I came here to see what Camp Jupiter had to offer for its citizens. I have no intention of getting involved with your war."

Especially when I have Camp Half-Blood and the spy business to worry about, I thought. I didn't want to shoulder three different sides.

Jason said firmly, "your augury claims that you will 'lead the trail'. From that, I believe that you know where the Titan's main base is. Do you, Hadrian?"

My eyes narrowed at the hinted accusation. "I might. I've heard a lot of things during my travels, but I don't know if anything I learned would be of any use."
"It should," Jason insisted. "Do you remember anything that might help? Any locations come to mind?"

I hesitated. Ms. See had mentioned the main base being at Mount Othrys, a mountain that once resided in Greece, but now occupies Mount Tamalpais. Coincidentally, Seth had went there during the quest to save Artemis. I could still picture the alluring Garden of the Hesperides and the smothering dark Mist. The last time I was there as Seth, I knew it was a big enemy hideout, I just didn't know it was the main one. What were the chances that I would stumble upon the Titan's main base during a Quest?

I decided to tell him what I knew. "Have you heard of Mount Othrys?" He nodded. "That site was where the first Titan war took place, and it will be the same for the second war."

"You know where it is?" he said.

"Yes," I admitted. "It has moved to Mount Tamalpais, located near Mill County."

"I see," Jason whispered, taking in the info quickly. He looked at me curiously. "How did you know?"

"I...accidentally stumbled upon it," I said vaguely. I didn't want Jason to know about my previous Quest, for that would expose my relation with Camp Half-Blood. "Last I saw it, a Titan was bringing in more troops from the sea."

"Why didn't you tell us this earlier?" Jason exclaimed, looking angry. "Didn't you think about giving us a warning?"

I refrained from rolling my eyes, annoyed by his temper. "You wouldn't have believed me if I told you. You and Reyna and probably everyone else were holding me at a knife's edge. If I revealed what I told you, you'd sooner think I was an enemy than an ally." Jason flinched, looking guilty.

"Sorry," he apologized, "I should have realized how it might look for you."

I nodded tersely. "Is that all?"

"Look, I appreciate you telling me this, Hadrian," Jason began, "but I must ask that you also join me on this mission. We have too little time to scout a whole mountain, and since you've seen the base already..."

"You want me as a guide?" I finished.

"Yes," he said. "I'm not asking you to do much. As long as you can take us to our destination, your role will be over. You can leave us if you want, and I won't stop you."

I didn't answer right away. It was logical of Jason to ask me to join for this reason only. He didn't care about my abilities, whether I could be trusted or not even. All he cared about was the map that resided in my head, and it appeared that Jason also had Thalia's stubborn streak. I also noticed how he spoke without a shred of hesitance.

"You're very certain," I noted. "You believe your plan will succeed."

"Yes," Jason agreed. "If I didn't, then it wouldn't be called a plan."

I nodded. I could understand that, and I recalled how Thalia was like that too. "What if things don't fall into place? Do you have a back-up plan? A plan B?"
"I tend to trust my first plan before making any others," Jason replied. "But if it comes down to it...I will depend on you to come up with one...if you're joining me?" He held out a hand.

I didn't bother to look at it. It troubled me to see how Jason was so...trusting towards me. He didn't know me, yet he was giving me a vital role that could determine Camp Jupiter's future. Was he being naïve? Or was he being a simple-minded idiot?

Despite how this would make me look, I decided to voice out these uncertainties. "How can you trust me with a mission like this? We're just short of being strangers."

Jason's eyes were downcast, but his hand remained up. "It's true that I don't know you, and you don't know me. What I do know, however, is that your coming here can't be a coincidence. Lord Mercury trusts you, and Lord Terminus..." I scowled at the name. "...has hinted at your ability-!"

"My ability?" I echoed sardonically. "You see me as a weapon too?"

"I see you as a potential ally," Jason said, "as well as a friend." I didn't comment. "I want to get to know you better, Hadrian, and this mission would also be an opportunity for us to do so."

Friends...I thought humorlessly. Before I decided to reveal myself, I had watched Seth interact with the Greek demigods on the sidelines. I remembered feeling envious of how easy it was for Seth to gain their enthusiasm, their interests, and their trust. That envy soon changed to scorn when I realized how much Seth had given himself up to gain their acceptance. He allowed others to know his life, and our weaknesses, giving others the keys to exploit us.

Since that realization, I believed it was best to not get close to anyone. If I had to give myself up for the sake of having others give themselves up, I rather not risk it. I thought Seth had learned that lesson when Artemis betrayed him, but then he got too optimistic at camp. He wanted to start over, try again, only to be crushed by Luke and Clare's treachery.

I hated Luke, but I despised Clare. I despised her for using Seth's kindness as a way to backstab him. I despised her for the pain I felt from Seth while he slept, not knowing that I was watching over him in the shadows of our mind. I had been tempted to reveal myself, but I was too weak. I couldn't even stop Kronos' presence from invading our mind, much less help Seth in physical matters.

You need to start taking charge, Hunter.

I stared at Jason's hand once more, and for once, I thought about what I wanted. Whether I joined Jason or decided to go back, the Fates would have their way. Seth would likely take over if I returned, and with him being grumpy with me, I knew I wouldn't be enjoying this body for a while, and I still haven't tested out my limits. So the best option for me would be...

I shook Jason's hand, startling the praetor. "I'll join you."

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It was night when I met with the rest of the team.

Jason had held a private Senate meeting, and once he had obtained their anonymous approval, he had set out to ask for volunteers from among his group of trusted acquaintances. Those who declined his request were sworn to secrecy. From what Dakota had told me, Camp Jupiter was also experiencing its share of spies. Parts of the real mission had been omitted, and now, the rest of the Romans only thought of it as an extended patrol.

Currently, I was alone at the entrance. I had both daggers tied behind my waist, and my bow and
quiver were strapped. There was a duffle bag filled with food and one set of clothes on the ground beside me. I had my arms crossed as I waited, my back leaning against one of the stray stone columns when I sensed a group of auras approaching. I quickly made out Jason's aura, followed by four unfamiliar ones. Each of them had on backpacks and small bags of supplies. From their vibrancy, I identified that two out of the four were demigods, likely children of Olympians, and the last two were legacies. I straightened when they came into sight.

"Jason," I said, dipping my head slightly. Jason nodded once. Behind him, I saw three other guys, and one girl, who all looked to be around Jason's age or older. One of the tall guys with dark hair looked at me skeptically, and for a moment, I wondered if Jason had mentioned me or not.

"You must be Hadrian Chase," the girl said with a small smile. "I'm Leila Kirsten, daughter of Ceres. You were placed in the Fifth Cohort right?" I nodded. "I sometimes see you hanging out with Bobby and Gwen when the Fourth Cohort was having clean-up duty. Are you friends with them?"

I hesitated. "We're good acquaintances."

"I also heard you're a son of Apollo," the boy beside Leila said. His lean stature, blonde hair, and quiver of arrows made it easy for me to guess who he's descended from. He held out a hand and I shook it in respect. "Nathan Truman, legacy of Apollo."

"Pleasure," I said curtly. "How's your archery?"

He gave a shrug. "Good enough for the praetor to ask me." Leila rolled her eyes.

"He's amazing at the bow!" Leila said while smiling at Nathan. I noticed how they were also holding hands. "He's just being modest. I'm sure he can show you a few tricks."

"Leila," Nathan protested, blushing.

"She's right, Nathan," Jason said. "You're one of our best archers here. I wouldn't have asked you otherwise."

"Thanks, Jason," Nathan said, and then he gave me a grin. "We archers got to stick together. Maybe we can learn from each other."

I returned the sentiment. "I look forward to it."

"You know, the night isn't getting any younger," another boy said. He looked short when standing next to Jason, his curly brown hair resembled a mop, and his dark eyes were filled with impatience. "We should get going! The sooner we get out of here the more likely we are to succeed! The chance of victory will grow from 23 percent to at least 31 percent if we commence now!"

"How would you know?" I wondered.

"I'm a legacy of Victoria," he declared. He looked strangely pleased when he turned to face me. "So you're Hadrian Chase! Just having you here would boost the rates of success to at least 54 percent..."

"Enough with the percentages, Jacob Fortes," the last member commented. The older teen was well-built, and had a sword hanging on his thigh. He had the face of a model: perfectly tanned skin, high cheekbones, and short ruffled dark hair. His aura was strong, and it was one I recognized instantly.

A son of Venus, I thought warily. Never thought I had to work with one of her children.

He felt my stare, and his skeptical eyes glanced at me briefly, before turning away. "Your predictions
change with every action taken. It's never consistent. I rather not hear you sprout new data every five seconds." Jacob gave him a mock-glare. "But I do agree on one thing—we should get going, praetor. Time is of the essence. The sooner we complete it, the better."

"You're right, Michael," Jason said. "Let's go."

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Chapter End Notes

Aside from Seth, the other four demigods in Jason's team are all canon characters. They were all mentioned in BOO, and Jacob was also briefly mentioned in SON as the Legion's eagle carrier. Michael Kahale and Leila have played minor roles in the last book while Nathan was mentioned by Jason as one of his trusted friends, possibly hinting his role in the second Titanomachy. Their parentage and personality (other than Michael's and Leila's) are made up by me.

Tell me all what you think of this chapter! Leave all thoughts, predictions, and comments in your review, but please, please don't flame me for Octavian. This story is meant to be an AU, and after thinking long and hard, I decided to off him for the sake of my plot.

Thanks for reading!
It takes 48 minutes by car from San Francisco to Mount Tamalpais.

Jason and Michael sat in the front. I was seated next to Jacob, while Leila and Nathan sat in the back. The Senate had given Jason permission to use the spare van, and Michael was the designated driver—the only member to have a driver's license. Jacob had slowly dozed off, and Jason looked austere as always, keeping his attention focused on the road. Michael had already set the GPS to Mount Tamalpais State Park, so my assistance wasn't needed yet. Despite having less than three hours of sleep last night, I remained alert. It's been awhile since I last rode in a car.

My eyes flickered to the window, and I could see the towering lights of the Golden Gate Bridge. The view was stunning. With its bright gold lights, the bridge was like a streak of gold in the darkness. Despite how captivating it was, my stomach began to feel queasy, reminding me of the limiter Poseidon had placed on me. I must have looked unwell when Nathan asked if I was okay.

"I'm fine," I dismissed. I resisted the urge to move my arm over my abdomen. I wasn't about to expose one of my weaknesses. I changed the topic. "What's the plan?"

Jason answered. "Our scouts have informed us that the camp is heavily guarded. Going in together would attract too much attention. To avoid that, I decided that we'll split into two groups. One group will be responsible for planting the bombs, while the other group will be the distraction."

That made sense. I had wondered why Jason needed five other people when two would have been sufficient. Three has always been an important number in Quests, and while this wasn't an official quest, it was just as important. "Who's doing what?"

"Nathan, Leila, and I will be in the second group," Jason said. "Jacob is in charge of the bombs and he will be placing the bombs where he thinks is best. Michael will also be with him."

"To serve as his bodyguard," I thought. Appearance wise, Jacob didn't look much like a fighter, but he recognized good chances. As a son of Victoria, he could determine which places would provide the best results, and he would have Michael, a swordsman, to protect him. As for the other team, Jason was obvious. As a son of Jupiter, his aura would attract too much attention for him to be in team one (whether he thought of that factor or not was a mystery). His priority would be to take down any strong opponents that crossed their path. Nathan's and Leila's abilities, I could assume, were best for defense. Their priority was the safety of their praetor and each other.

"What about me?" I asked. Jason looked surprised. "Or did you expect me to leave once I guide you all there?"

The praetor swallowed visibly. "I told you I wouldn't force you to stay."

"I don't do things halfway," I said sternly. "I will see this mission through to the end. Put me in a
group. I don't care which one. Unless...you don't want me to join?"

Jason and Michael glanced at each other.

"You can join Michael and Jacob," Jason said at last. "You're also an archer, right? Be sure to watch their backs."

"Will do," I muttered.

-o-

Surprisingly, I knew what I was doing.

Once we arrived at Tamalpais State Park, we ditched the car, and the six of us started the tour up the mountain. Since I came here a different way last time, I thought I'd have some trouble guiding my new group. The memories I had as 'Seth' were hazy, but the vibrant aura of monsters and immortal beings soon put those worries to rest.

We made our way up another steep hill. The two hour journey was mostly silent until Jason asked, "how much further?"

I thought about it. "We should soon be approaching the Garden of the Hesperides. The Mist is very heavy there."

"How can you tell?" Michael questioned. He looked skeptical.

"I sense it," I said.

"You sense it?" he said incredulously. I suppressed a sigh, knowing full well that Michael had been silently assessing my tracking skills, and it appeared that I've fallen short of his expectations.

"I know where I'm going," I said slowly, trying to sound calm even though his doubts pissed me off. "I've been here before. That's why Jason asked me."

We continued our hike. My silver eyes wandered about endlessly, my gloved hands brushing through tall weeds. I also took out Nightwalker, making distinct scratch marks on some trees we walked past. While I had no trouble finding my way back, I doubt the others were as adept. The air was getting denser and Mist-laden as we traveled up. I was also conscious of the time: if it got too dark, we'd make slower progress. After an hour, I stopped at the base of a small mountain. The amount of auras I sensed was so vibrant that I knew the Titan camp was close.

Nathan asked, "Why did you stop?"

"The camp is on the other side," I answered briskly. "We need to make our way over this hill. We have to make our way over this hill." I turned around to face them all. "Anyone bring any climbing gear?"

"Leila," Jason said. The daughter of Ceres nodded.

After murmuring a few words, Leila placed something on the ground, her hand raised over it. I felt a slight rumbling, and the ground suddenly erupted. Large vines sprung forth, and I saw the others grab hold of the vines before I did the same. Once I had a firm grasp, my whole body was lifted high into the air as the humongous plant grew bigger and taller. Soon, my feet landed on firm ground, and I saw Leila causing the beanstalk to shrivel up, hiding all traces of the abnormality.

That was convenient.
On top of the mountain, there were bushes and a couple trees with boulders scattered around. I climbed one of those trees swiftly, and noticed many glowing fires below. The Titan camp was right below us, placed together in niches. My sharp eyes noticed armored dracaena and hellhounds patrolling. At a distance, I saw the veiled Garden of the Hesperides, and I swallowed uncomfortably when I saw it, for it was the site of Zoe's death. Atlas still remained under his burden, and I didn't want to encounter him a second time. If Atlas saw me, he would undoubtedly expose my true identity. Unfortunately, since the Garden of the Hesperides was the only route in, I could only hope that I made myself insignificant enough to avoid Atlas' attention.

I heard someone knock on the bark. I looked down and saw Jason.

"What do you see?" he asked.

I made my way down before answering. "There are a couple patrols out, and their numbers are scattered everywhere. We'll have to sneak past the lower grounds before making our way to the Garden of the Hesperides. That's where their main base is at."

"How tight are the patrols?" he questioned.

"They're sparse," I said, "but I can't determine their times."

Jason took that in silently, analyzing his options. "Keep your eye on their patrols. We need to know when it's safe to maneuver. We're setting up camp tonight. For now though...help me gather some firewood."

I complied, and Jason and I started to gather up spare wood. While doing so, I noticed a large stick buried deep in the ground. I tried to yank it out with a bare hands, but it didn't budge. Frustrated, I thought about summoning one of my steel knives, but thought better of it when I noticed how close Jason was. If he saw me summoning things, he wasn't going to leave it alone. So instead, I reluctantly took out one of my daggers to cut it off and add it to my growing bundle. Jason took notice of the action, and stared at my weapon curiously.

"Where did you get those daggers?" he asked.

I hesitated, "they were a gift."

"Can I hold them?"

Again, I hesitated. I didn't like it when others touched my things, especially my weapons, and out of all my weapons, my daggers were the most precious to me. They were the first weapons to be in my possession, and since they've been given to me, I've always remembered to polish them whenever I had the chance to. It wasn't that I'd favored them over all my other weapons—I still used my bow and arrows just as frequently, along with my added arsenal of modern weaponry and swords. I judged each weapon by its utility, so I had no 'favorite'. Rather, the special treatment was because it came from Camp Half-Blood. It was different from my bow, which had been remade many times from me. The daggers were a gift from Camp Half-Blood, my second home, and by taking care of this gift, I felt like I was honoring the Camp in turn.

Jason must have noticed my discomfort when he retracted his words. "It's okay if you don't want me to. It's just...I've never seen someone use Stygian Iron weapons before. The material is very rare, and I've heard mentions of its special properties. I'm curious."

"What are you curious about?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Is the metal as strong as celestial bronze or imperial gold? Is it better for quick rapid
strikes or brunt attacks? Do downward and upward hits differ in damage? How is a monster's essence absorbed after its death? Stuff like that."

I smirked at his inquiries. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were a child of Vulcan. I didn't think you'd be interested in those kinds of things."

Jason smiled. "I always believe every soldier should know their weapons. How else would you be able to use them properly? It helps me come up with different techniques."*

I nodded in approval. He and Lynetta agreed on the same thing. "What weapons do you use?"

Jason rummaged through one of his pockets and took out a... coin? I was about to question how a gold coin could be used in battle before Jason flipped it high in the air, my sharp eyes widening as I saw the coin morph and twist rapidly into a double-edge sword. Jason caught the sword's handle expertly and held it upright. I had my mouth agape in astonishment before I quickly closed it. I gave myself a mental slap on the head. Of course the coin was magical. It was just like Percy's pen, Riptide. Duh.

"This is one of its weapon forms," Jason informed, looking proud. He must have noticed my shock earlier. "It depends on which side the coin flips. Since it landed on heads, it turned into a sword. But if it had landed on tails, then I'd be holding a javelin instead."

"That's pretty neat," I said, impressed. "Can you control which side the coin lands on?"

"Not quite," he admitted, "which is why I made sure to be adept with both forms."

"Does it have a name?"

"Not an official one," Jason said, "but the word, Ivlivs- Julius- is engraved on both sides. That's what I call my weapon." His gaze lingered on my dagger once more. "What are yours called?"

"Nocte Ambulare," I translated in Latin. "Nightwalker." I placed my bundle of wood down so I could take out Dark Hacker. "This one is called Tenebris Circumdatos."**

"Fitting," the praetor said. "How long have you had them?"

"Awhile," I said ambiguously. I didn't know if Jason was testing out my story, but I rather not give him any doubts. I strapped my daggers behind my back and picked up the bundle, trying to ignore the disappointment on Jason's face. "We should be getting back."

When we returned, the food had already been prepared and the tents set. Nathan and Leila were sitting together, sharing a plate of roasted food. Michael was sprawled on his back, his hands placed behind his head. His dark brown eyes glanced our way when Jason and I approached before closing them again. There was an empty plate beside him. Jacob was kneeling by the fire, his back towards us. Eventually, he noticed our presence and quickly gave Jason and me a plate of food. I quickly muttered my thanks and had my fill. There were only four tents. Nathan and Leila shared one tent, while Michael and Jacob shared another. Leila and Jason each had their own. The fire was extinguished, and Michael was assigned first watch.

While I settled down in a sleeping bag, I was once again impressed with the Romans' efficiency and preparation. They had the tools for every possible scenario thus far, and when they lacked tools, they made it up with power and collaboration. Each member here had their specialized roles, and I had to admire Jason's insight in his choices. Maybe it was because they had funds and a Senate to back them, but I wished the Greeks also followed this format. I've lost count of how many times Seth starved or ran into accidents that could've been easily prevented during his Quests.
Nathan had laid down in his sleeping bag with one arm propped up to hold his tilted face. His blonde hair was in disarray, and for a moment, he almost reminded me of Will—if not for the age gap. He noticed how I was still sitting upright. "You should get some sleep, Hadrian. Big day tomorrow."

"I know," I said. "I'm just...thinking."

"About what?" Nathan questioned. "If you don't mind me asking."

I shook my head. "Do you guys do missions like this often?"

"Not really," the older teen said. "We only do missions when something major comes up. Otherwise, we'd just send out scouts to deal with it. Why do you ask?"

"You're all very organized," I admitted. "Nothing seems spontaneous. This camping arrangement? What Leila did back there? Jason's strategy of dividing us up? None of you seemed ruffled by the risks that may happen."

Nathan smiled and gave a mirthful laugh. "You give us too much credit."

"What?"

"Hadrian, would you believe me if I told you that this is the first mission Leila, Jacob, and I have ever been on? Or that Jason has never led a group outside the camp boundaries? Or how this is only Michael's second time outside San Francisco?"

My eyes narrowed, not expecting those details.

"We've been trained for this since the day each of us entered the Legion," Nathan replied. "By birthright, we are descendants of the Roman Empire. It's in our nature to be adept in war matters and achieve our own ambitions. It's wouldn't be Roman-like to do anything unprepared."

"Still," I insisted. "Training doesn't account for life experience. There must be something..."  

He shrugged. "That's all there is to it. If there must be a 'something’, then it's Jason. He's our praetor, but more than that, he is our friend and comrade. We know he has our interests in mind. That's why each of us tagged along to support him."

"How can you be so sure?" I said dubiously. Then, I decided to ask what had been bothering me since the start. "Isn't that like blind loyalty? I'm not saying that Jason’s a bad leader. He's competent, and he's better than some I've met, but he isn't perfect. None of you question his judgment."

During the first Quest, Percy had been in charge, but even though he was the one leading, Annabeth and Seth always questioned his decisions and added our input. If we hadn't, then we'd be stuck in Medusa's Emporium or Percy might have sacrificed himself to save his mother. He made better rational decisions later on, and as a result, was able to command leadership. It was important for any leader to listen to his or her peers' advice and be open-minded. Otherwise, they'd be another Antiphates. Or, in what I could deduce from Jason, they'd be overburdened by the responsibility.

"It's not that we don't question Jason," Nathan said carefully, "it's because he has already proven himself. I sometimes forget you're new to the Legion's customs, but Jason had to complete five years of service to the Legion before given permission to run for praetor, and of those five years, he has to have been made a high ranking official. If he was inadequate, then he would not have been elected. That's why we have two praetors. Reyna and Jason keep each other in check. They have the authority to question each other, as well as the Senate."
"Reyna and the Senate aren't here," I pointed out.

"True," he relented, "but they gave Jason permission to be out here. That gives Jason enough credibility." He looked at me strangely. "You…you're not a trusting kind of guy, huh?"

My jaw tightened. "No."

"Did Jason offend you? Is that why you're questioning him?" he said quietly. He was suspicious, but his tone didn't belie any malicious intent. I decided to satisfy his inquiry.

"Jason's a good guy," I said honestly. "I might even say I understand him. He's respectful and charismatic, and he reminds me of an acquaintance. He didn't offend me..."

...but I'm wary of him all the same, I thought. I was asking these questions not because I doubted Jason's decisions, but in order to comprehend his situation. In history, children of the Big Three have always played big roles. With so few of them due to the Big Three Pact, I've no doubt that Jason was a game-changer. Just like how Percy and Thalia have proven themselves to be. Even when I leave Camp Jupiter and its people behind, I'd make sure to keep track of Jason with Walt's help. Octavian may have reported the Great Prophecy, and believed Jason to be its key player. If Percy failed, then Jason (not Bianca) was next in line. The Titans would think the same thing, and now Jason was running headstrong into their direction. I'd be damned if I allowed Thalia's brother be caught, or worse, corrupted by them.

I needed to make sure that someone would be there for Jason if he slipped up. Someone needed to be by his side to keep him in line, keep him grounded. From what Nathan told me, that someone was Reyna. I could only do so much from a distance. So, I'd leave the rest to Reyna, even if I didn't like her that much.

Now that I got the information I wanted, I forced a subtle yawn. "You're lucky to have Jason as your praetor, Nathan." Let's hope you guys keep a good hold on him.

"I know," he said, grinning. He lied back down again. "Wake me when it's my shift."

-0-

My hands were bloody.

I twisted my waist, my knees bent halfway to dodge a leaping hellhound. My hand brushing against dirt before I propelled my whole body up, doing a series of acrobatic turns and flips before securing my legs around a dracaena's neck, grinning as I heard its neck snap! I quickly heard the hellhound come back again. I quickly flipped over, doing a reverse hand stand and clasped my legs around the barely dissolved dracaena before tossing the monster at the incoming hellhound. The beast was pushed back momentarily before charging at me again. As it ran at me head on, I timed its movements before jumping as high as I could, my feet barely touching the passing monster's head before it slammed down at its neck, its nerves and bones threatening to break.

We were close to the Garden of the Hesperides. I glanced over to see Nathan and Leila engaging a group of telekhines, his arrows and her plant defenses allowed them to push them back. Michael had his hands full against two cyclops before I saw him sidestep a club swing and lop off an arm with his broad sword. The cyclops screamed before Michael plunged its sword into its chest and proceeded to finish off the other. Jacob was scurrying about, dropping tiny detonations of explosive fire. His speed nimble and accurate as he dodged incoming arrows and knives, sliding under them before tossing his hand-made grenades. Jason was a surprise: he was flying, sword in hand, as he directed lightning strikes at numerous monsters with a swing of his weapon. I never knew children of Zeus or Jupiter
could fly. None of them seemed to be in a predicament.

I flipped over its limp body, about to engage another opponent before I caught its hushed whimper. The hellhound wasn't dead yet. The monster lied flat on its side, making tortured, erratic sounds. I walked up to it, and looked down at its helpless form, insulted that this thing was still breathing. I pinned a mental note, reminding myself to improve my combat strength before I crushed its esophagus with my foot. The filthy beast quickly vanished, and I smeared my dirtied shoe on the ground to get rid of the traces.

I cracked my gloved knuckles. My daggers were still secured behind my back, and my bow and quiver had been transferred out of sight before the battles started; I didn't want my arrows falling out while I moved. Even after facing teams of dracaena, hellhounds, and Gegeines (Earthborn), these dirt-faced, six-armed loincloth wearing turds—I felt no need to draw them out. I already had a gist of what my limits were when it came to archery and dual wielding at the Wolf House. Now, I wanted to test my hand to hand combat. Seth prefers using weapons of precision, keeping his fights clean and efficient. I like using my hands and feet. It kept fights interesting and personal, and I'd always look out for monsters that could force me to use my weapons. Those were the big baddies, the fun challengers. As for these wimps I was fighting? They didn't deserve a taste of my arrows, much less my prized daggers. Unless I was short on time or there were too many of them, I wasn't going to let their pathetic blood stain my possessions.

More monsters were arriving, drawn in by the flashy storm and loud explosions (courtesy of Jason and Jacob). I heard Jason yell at Michael, who nodded and said something inaudible before Jacob joined him. When he looked at me, I knew the plan was starting. We were splitting up.

Michael, Jacob, and I quickly left the scene and entered the Garden. I was in the front, with Michael taking the rear, making sure we weren't followed. My silver eyes spotted the familiar fruit and vegetation. I flicked my fingers, signaling them to cover up their noses. I had warned them of its alluring scent. We kept going until I heard someone talking. I lifted my arm and stopped abruptly, causing Jacob to collide into me.

"Hey, what-!" I shushed him with a stern look and the three of us hide behind a berry bush as two figures appeared, a man and a young woman. Both of them wore army uniforms: camouflaged jackets and pants with ankle length combat boots. The man had on a pair of shades. His black hair was moussed and he had very tanned skin, like he spent hours under the sun. He had a large frame, his jawline very defined and there was a celestial bronze bo staff (in retractable form) strapped behind his back, and a jagged knife tied to his waist. His aura was radiant and recognizable. The woman beside him was petite. She was Hispanic, and had wavy dark hair tied in a low pony tail with an army beret on her head. She carried no weaponry, as far as I could tell anyway. She also had a noticeable aura, but it was one I couldn't distinguish. Behind me, I heard Michael suck in a harsh breath, and we could hear snippets of their conversation as they approached.

"...predictable," the man was saying. "Of all the days! Carmela, give me the damage report."

The woman, Carmela, responded, "At least half our forces in the east has been taken out. Some reported seeing large storm clouds and an abnormal amount of lightning and Venus fly-traps."

The man sneered, his hand almost itching to take out his staff. "I know it's him. Only Jason Grace would be this bold." I heard Jacob give a startled gasp. "If Lord Krios calls, and I'm not there to take it, tell 'em I'm taking care of a pest problem."

"Yes," Carmela muttered, looking bored. "Anything else?"

"Take care of his friends," the man ordered, "but leave Jason to me."
Carmela sighed, and followed the man out, vanishing from our line of sight. When the coast was clear, I turned and looked at Michael, whose eyes were downcast. For once, I almost felt...sympathetic for the least likely person here.

"Who is he?" I asked him. I already knew the answer, but I wanted Michael to confirm it. To express permission for me to know what I knew. Jacob looked worried.

The son of Venus looked at me, his dark eyes narrowing as he discreetly analyzed my countenance. His mouth tightened in a thin line, and then he looked away, but not before giving me a glimpse of his hidden turmoil.

Sensing his comrade's discomfort, Jacob answered instead. "That's Marcus. He was our praetor, before Jason."***

A praetor. So that explained how the man knew Jason, and why the two Romans with me had become very nervous. Seeing their old leader as their enemy wasn't easy, especially when said enemy was once...

"You guessed," Michael said, sounding very certain. I nodded once, causing Jacob's eyes to widen, looking at both of us with uncertainty.

"Why did you join this mission?" I questioned, suspicious. "You knew that there was a chance he would show..."

"...and it's because I knew there was a chance that I insisted that Jason bring me," Michael said sternly. "I had to meet Marcus-!"

"For what?" I interrupted. This conversation was starting to sound familiar. "So you could convince him otherwise? To save him?"

"No," he said sharply, "it's so I can kill him."

I wasn't going to deny it. The conviction I heard in his tone was absolute and left no doubts. I never expected such a cold answer from him. I'd never admit it out loud, but it was...admirable. For a son of the godly queen bitch anyway. Michael lowered his gaze, and seemed to take slow, deep breaths, like he was trying to keep his thoughts under wraps. Who would have thought that Michael would be this determined to break the very obligations his mother enforced?

War isn't a game. Lynetta had said. It seemed so long ago. Murder is justified. Betrayal is common...war punishes both good and evil...

I sighed at the depressing words. The official war hasn't even started, and we've already got half-siblings trying to kill each other. Talk about overrated.

"I don't expect you to understand," Michael said quietly, "but I know which side I'm on. My loyalty is to the Legion, and no one can change that." He clenched his sword tighter. "It won't be long before Marcus realizes that Jason is the bait. We need to set the bombs quickly before he and Carmela returns. Guide us there, Hadrian."

"Can do," I said.

We traveled through the Garden of the Hesperides. We were also getting closer to the site of Atlas' imprisonment. I saw the overgrown titan asshole still under his heavy burden. Tough luck, fella. The large ruined fortress stood tall and ominous as it came into view. There were monsters still, but their numbers were fewer here. My guess was that most of them had gone to where Jason's group were.
Just as planned, but getting inside wasn't going to be easy. I swallowed uncomfortably, never did I think I'd come here again.

"There should be an open air corridor down...that way," I said, pointing my index near the right side of the fortress. "Problem is, we still have a bunch of monsters in our way and we don't have the time to plow through them like before."

"He's right," Jacob confirmed. "It's been fifteen minutes since we last saw Marcus. There's an 88 percent chance that he's engaging Jason in battle right now. We need to get inside fast. If we could do that within the next...say, 10 minutes—that will give us the best chances of a successful outcome and getting out alive."

Michael asked, "What's our best shot? Sneak past them and hope none of them notice?"

"That didn't work well the first time, and frankly, I don't see any decent hiding places, and there's many of them. The likely chance of that happening would be less than 40 percent," Jacob announced.

"We need a Plan B," I said suddenly, an idea coming to mind. It wasn't perfect, but with the time we have, it would have to do. However, if I was to use this plan, I didn't want Michael or Jacob witness me doing it. "I'll create another distraction. You and Michael get inside and plant the bombs."

"No," Michael protested. "That's too risky! You'd be alone with hundreds of monsters for company with no back up! We're going to stay as a team, and follow Jason's instructions."

"There isn't enough time!" I argued. "It's either me or the mission, and don't bother with the statistics, Jacob. I'll be fine."

I knew I was right, and I knew Michael knew it. Still, it was rather flattering for the son of my enemy to concern himself over me. Then again, he didn't know who I really was. I briefly wondered what would happen if he did.

"Jacob, lend me some of your bombs," I replied. He quickly handed three of them in my outstretched hands. I pocketed them carefully. "Move when you hear the first go off. Got it?" They nodded.

I slid down the side of the hill, staying low and creeping past various monsters. I was running on light feet, keeping my movements as quiet as possible. I dropped down and halted behind a tent as a young boy came out, yawning. From his aura, I deduced that he was a legacy. He didn't notice me, and kept going about his way. I also sensed other godly auras in the surrounding tents. I knew there were Roman traitors, but I didn't expect this many to be here.

I continued on, and I spotted a truck pulling in. The cargo was covered with a dusty brown cloth and pinned down tightly. I saw a couple Roman deserters speak with the driver, saying something about food supplies. I smirked, reaching into my pocket for one of Jacob's bombs. I found my first target.

I only had a moment to carry out the plan. I prepped myself ready before I charged into the clearing. I saw enemies turn their heads in shock, another reached for their weapon, but I had already tossed the bomb onto the truck. I only had a second to turn my head before it exploded. I felt the heated shockwave as my body was flung into the air before collided against one of tents. The truck was set aflame, serving as a large flashy beacon that basically said 'Hey look! Here's an enemy! Get him!'

Despite my bruised joints and scabs, I pushed my haggard body up and sprinted to the other side as fast I could. Michael and Jacob must be on the move, and I had to make sure all our enemies pursued me. I saw monsters coming up to block my path, and I threw another bomb. The explosion pained
my ears, but it also created a smoke screen to assist my escape. I threw the last of my bombs behind me as I got to higher ground.

With no bombs and too many enemies to count, the weapons I had in hand were no good. I had limited arrows, and my energy was already too well spent to summon any celestial silver weapons for a long period of time. It was time to use my last resort.

Walt was going to be pissed.

Ever since Artemis had abruptly barged in to grab my counterpart, I knew Walt had his own stash of weapons outside the ones I've seen in the Training Room. The guy was a son of Vulcan—I'd be more surprised if he didn't have his own private toys. One of his toys, in particular, was a high-grade celestial bronze M20 Super Bazooka. I had wondered where Walt had hidden this gem since Seth returned, and when I finally revealed myself, I had secretly snuck into Walt's room, the place where Walt had expressively told me to stay out of since Seth's first day there.

That didn't stop me. It was easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, right?

Eventually, I had located the big guns behind one of the cabinets. I only looked at the row of different editions of rocket launchers, and there was even a grappling and machine gun. Above, there were rows and rows of celestial bronze and imperial gold ammunition. I had let out a gasp, awed by the sight. Walt is a genius, and I wondered why the gods didn't use his inventions more. I resisted the urge to touch them, in case of alarms, and rearranged the cabinets back to how it was.

When I finally reached a good angle, I turned around to face the incoming swarm of monsters. Michael and Jacob should be inside, leaving no witnesses of what I was about to do.

I raised my arms up, gave a jolly big smile before something large, metallic, and heavy landed in my outstretched hands. I propped up the rocket launcher, squinted one eye as I gave my enemies, who suddenly backed off in surprise, a salute.

"You all have five seconds to evacuate before everything goes ka-boom," I said solemnly. "Please be sure to take your arms, legs, and other belongings with you or else risk losing them." I heard the monsters make irritable noises as they charged at me. I counted down as I placed my hand over the trigger. "One way trip to Tartarus coming up! Enjoy your trip."

I fired the loaded M20 Bazooka, the blast demolishing all the monsters in sight. I raised my arm to shield my eyes from the vibrant smoke, lowering the weapon in my hand. Normal bazookas had a lot of firepower, but this bazooka, I realized, was anything but normal. It was custom-made by Walt with celestial bronze rockets, and the firepower was a lot stronger than I calculated. I had expected to take out half of the forces and maybe injure the rest with the explosion's shockwave. Not only did it kill or fatally injure my enemies, but it even took out some tents and vehicles they had parked nearby.

Surveying the damage with satisfaction, I allowed the M20 to vanish. Shame it was only a one-time use. This time, I had two guns in my hands. I did a quick walk-through, placing a bullet into any survivors. It wouldn't be responsible of me if I didn't clean up my act.

I shot another charred monster, about to join the others when I caught a muffled gasp. I turned my head slowly, craning my sharp ears to listen. When I heard the noise again, my eyes narrowed as I stalked towards a pile of destroyed rubble. The 'rubble' consisted of a burnt truck that had keeled on its side, spilling different fluids and grain. I walked around it and discovered...a young boy.

His head was bleeding profusely, and there were burned marks on his arms and right leg. One of his arms had fractures in three different places, and his lungs had inhaled too much smoke. However, no
matter how grievous his injuries appeared, I somehow knew he'd recover if given the proper
treatment. All of this, I was able to diagnose within ten seconds by sight. The boy looked scared out
of his wits when he saw me. He looked no older than thirteen.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

The boy took a moment to answer. I noticed how he tried to swallow but could only manage
halfway. His whole body trembled in pain and fear. "P-P-Patrick," he rasped.

I grew impatient. "I didn't ask for your name. I asked 'who are you?'- Do you work for Kronos?"

When he didn't answer, I took that as a yes. "You work for Kronos. So even little kids like you are
getting hired to do the dirty work, huh?" I lowered my gun as I tossed my head back for a laugh.
"Oh man, why am I even laughing? The gods do the same shitty-ass thing..." I sighed, and knelt
down so he and I were eye-level, my weapons clenched tightly. "What should I do with you...?"

The kid, Patrick, seemed to shrink away, his eyes (which were a dark hazel color) never left my
guns. "P-p-please d-don't k-kill-!

"Don't kill you?" I finished. "Why shouldn't I? We're enemies. It's your own damn fault for getting
caught in my explosion. I mean, really, I even had the courtesy to give a warning."

"I...I'll leave!" the boy cried. "I-I-I won't say anything!" I shook my head.

"See, this is the tricky part," I said like I was talking to a baboon. "You're young, kid. Got your
whole life ahead of you and all that shit. I'd like to let you go. Really, I do. Except...there's no
absolute guarantee that you would carry out what you just promised. You could be lying to me. I
could let you go and then you'd go tattle on me to your superiors. Or, you could be a vengeful son of
a bitch. You see a common theme here? There are too many 'coulds' and I don't like that"

I stood back up and pointed my gun at his head. The boy's eyes started to water. "It's really too bad
we got to meet this way, but you are an enigma, and the best way to prevent this enigma from
becoming an obstacle is to take it o-!

STOP!

I felt my weapon hand freeze in place, like I suddenly lost control of it. I gritted my teeth. Now's
NOT a good time, Seth-!

LET THE KID GO! Seth shouted. He's only a boy!

He's an enemy! I snarled. Age should never matter in a battlefield! He made his choices-

And he's regretted them! Seth yelled. DON'T do this, Hunter. This isn't you-

"You don't know me," I said icily. "You've never cared to know me unless I pushed for it. You don't
get to tell me what to do."

For the first time, I made Seth speechless, but as soon as the shock went out, I felt a wave of anger as
Seth tried to seize control. If he wasn't able to convince me, then he was going to force his way in. I
involuntarily dropped the guns as I placed my hands to my head. I was experiencing a massive
headache, like hot needles were poking at my brain constantly, but I held on. I was forced to stumble
back and fall to my knees, letting out a scream. I was in too much pain to focus on anything, much
less notice how the kid had slowly inched forward and grabbed one of my dropped weapons...
By the time I noticed, it was too late. Seth had been yelling his nonsense until he finally saw what happened.

N-no way... he said in disbelief.

He fired without hesitance.

There was a scream, and it wasn't from me.

The bullet didn't even graze me; it was completely off the mark. Instead, it was the boy who yelled. He had held the gun poorly, too feeble to grasp it correctly and suffered from the gun's sharp recoil. Lynetta had told me that without proper training or knowledge, placing a gun in the hands of a rookie would be nothing short of disastrous. I was glad she was right.

Taking advantage of Seth's shock, I quickly gained full control of our body once more. Before the boy got the chance to fire again, I threw a summoned celestial silver knife. The knife embedded itself into the boy's chest, killing him instantly. With a flick of my fingers, the knife disappeared and revealed a bloody hole.

For a while, there was silence. I sensed Seth's turmoil over what had occurred, and if I wasn't so furious, I might have comforted him.

"Do you realize what just happened?!" I yelled at my stunned counterpart. "You nearly got us killed! Next time you want to butt in, try not to act so stupid!"

I could feel Seth's struggle to counter, but he couldn't find the right words.

"This, is the type of scum we are dealing with," I said coldly. Slowly, I let my ire go down. I wasn't going to add more salt into fresh wounds. "This, is what happens when you show mercy to those who don't deserve it."

I waited for Seth to reply, but he still hasn't recovered. I didn't know when he would, honestly. Seth wasn't used to this kind of brutality like I was. I feared that he may never return to that blissful state of ignorance. I felt him retreat further into our mind, and the words I had wanted to lash out died in my throat.

He finally gained an inkling of understanding of what I've been trying to tell him all along. It was what I wanted, what I've yearned for—to have Seth accept me for who I am.

But at what cost?

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Chapter End Notes

* Jason's interest in weaponry is added by me. I believe that Rick's depiction of Jason is too shallow, and he isn't given enough characterization to make him distinct like the rest. Riordan could've done so much with Jason, like explain his past with Camp Jupiter better. Instead, he had to knock Jason out with a brick during MOA. I'll try to keep Jason as canon as possible, but remember this Jason is before he has amnesia. His thinking is bound to be different, and I'll be adding more developments.
I had used Google translate for the Latin terms for Nightwalker and Dark Hacker. By verbatim, they mean 'Night walk' and 'Dark cutter' (there was no Latin term for Hacker).

I decided to introduce Marcus much earlier than expected. He's almost like a Roman-version of Luke, but with a lot more charisma and leadership experience. If you didn't realize from the content, Marcus is a son of Venus. I had decided to have him be a previous praetor to explain Camp Jupiter's history before Jason rose to power. As you could probably guess, Marcus and Carmela will be appearing in future chapters.
Regarding some questions I got, I decided to tell the rest of you my response in case any of you were wondering. The question was: Is there any downside to Nemesis' blessing and guns?

Nemesis' blessing does seem overpowered, but remember that it is limited to only small items—anything from a paper clip to a bazooka in the last chapter. Anything larger than a launcher like a dinner table is out as well as any symbols of power. You also need to have a very sharp memory in order to visualize where to grab the desired item. If the item is even an inch off, then it will not come. You also have to have at least some eye contact with the item in said place, so that means my character won't be able to, say, steal money from a locked vault. Seth will have trouble with this because his memory isn't as good as Hunter's, and there will also be other limiters I plan on revealing later.

Guns are tricky. They're modern and they're faster than most weapons. I can understand why Riordan would hold off on them (not including how guns can be 'violent' for his intended audience). Guns are not overpowered, because ultimately guns and swords and the like are all tools, and every tool's efficiency is dependent on its wielder's skill. Even if every demigod were given a gun to use, there will always be some who won't be able to master it. Again, it comes down to skill, talent, and preference. The bazooka's firepower also seem overpowered, but it's really the equivalent of a relatively decent amount of Greek fire.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After I finished cleaning up, the whole fortress erupted.

I had to crouch low to maintain my balance, the ground unsteady as I saw the roof cave in. Smoke was everywhere, and there were more explosions. I squinted my eyes as I ran towards it. I had to make sure Michael and Jacob were okay. I eventually spotted them emerging out of the billowing ashes. Both of them sported cuts and bruises, and Jacob's left arm was held tightly against his abdomen, like it was broken. Michael noticed my fast approach.

"What happened?" I asked.

He swallowed, appearing to be out of breath. "We need to meet the others and get out of here."

"Have you seen Jason?" Jacob said. I shook my head.

"I was occupied," I said. I stared down at his arm. Shit, that looked bad. "Jacob, you can't keep cradling your arm like that. Here..." I stripped off my jacket and tore off the ends, making a quick sling. I could always get a new one. I instructed Jacob to sit down and helped him put it on, while shoving a piece of ambrosia cake into his hand. I always had some on me, just in case. "Eat this, and don't fidget."

"You have ambrosia cakes?" Michael said.
I didn’t look up. "Don't you?" I only got a grunt in response before I finally secured the boy's arm. "Don't add any pressure to it until we get you into a better cast. Doctor's orders." Those last two words slipped out of my mouth before I could filter it in my mind. I was so used to Will telling me that every time he took care of my injuries that it had become a reflex. The memory suddenly made me a little homesick.

We had to keep moving. More enemies were arriving, and we didn't have the manpower to handle them. The sooner we met up with Jason's group, the sooner we could retreat. We made our way back inside the Garden of the Hesperides. I allowed Michael to take the lead because I, being the temporary medic, was carrying Jacob along. He had protested, his pride not allowing him to ask for help, but I had insisted. I had the young boy on a piggy back ride so we'd cover more ground.

We heard familiar voices, and raced towards it. When we finally came out of the foliage, I nearly dropped Jacob:

Jason was engaging in combat with Marcus, who had pulled out his bo staff and used it as leverage to aim extremely high kicks and to defend against Jason's aerial attacks. His movements were fast, his shots harsh and precise, a deadly combination of strength and agility. I recognized most of his moves to be Tae Kwon Do, a martial art that specialized in kicks and strengthening the lower body.

"MARCUS!" Michael yelled. I didn't have a chance to stop him as he raised his sword and charged in to join Jason in battle. Marcus landed a hit on Jason's abdomen, causing him to stumble before he turned and blocked Michael's strike.

"Mikey!" Marcus exclaimed, clearly surprised. "Jason allowed you to come?"

"I asked to," Michael sneered, "so I can personally send your corpse to Lord Pluto's gates!"

Marcus smirked, "how crude. You know, I always had a soft spot for you, Mikey. If you had joined me, you could've easily become a lieutenant, my second in command. A better position than where you're at now. Our dad would have wanted that for you."

"Shut up!" Michael shouted and the two of them were locked into an intense clash of sword and staff.

I was startled by the exchange. I knew that Michael and Marcus had the same mother, but I didn't know they shared the same father too. I quickly snapped out of my daze when Jacob insisted to be let down.

"Look, I get how I'm younger than all of you, but it doesn't make me a baby," Jacob said. "Just let me down. I may have a broken arm, but my legs work fine." I nodded tersely, and let him down without protest. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Leila and Nathan engaging Carmela in battle. I decided to join them.

While everyone was distracted, I discreetly summoned my bow and arrows and launched three shots at Carmela, who noticed my attack a second too late, and got one of my arrows lodged in her back shoulder. She gave a gasp of pain before flipping back to dodge Leila's knife attack. Carmela gave me a vehement glare before she quickly backed away and disappeared into the woods.

"We need to leave," I told Leila quickly. "Our enemies are catching up."

Leila nodded. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Only Jacob," I informed. "He's got a broken arm. We have to tell Jason-!"
A loud thunderous noise interrupted me, and Leila, Nathan, and I instantly turned to see Jason sending a bolt of lightning that had sent Marcus flying in the air before crashing into the trees. Michael had wanted to continue the fight, but Jason stopped him.

"Leave him," Jason instructed, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Our job is done." Michael wanted to protest, but he backed off. Jason caught my stare. "Let's get out of here."

Getting out was easier said than done.

"Step on the gas, Mike!" Nathan shouted from the back. The back window had shattered, and Nathan was shooting arrows every five seconds. "They're gaining on us!"

"I AM!" Michael bellowed, completely stressed out. The car sped up even faster, and the speed arrow was reaching the eighties. "HANG ON!"

The van swerved violently, and had I not been grasping the edge of my seat, I would have been sent crashing into the side doors. Leila was holding her boyfriend down securely by the waist as he shot arrow after arrow while I held onto Jacob, who was also tossing out the last of his bombs. Behind us, there was a swarm of griffons flying above us, and a whole stampede of hellhounds, dracaena, and telekhines. Jason remained in the van. He would have gone out flying solo if the rest of us hadn't stopped him. While Jason was powerful in his own right, all of us knew he'd be outnumbered. Still, that didn't stop him from closing his eyes and mentally directing blasts of lightning at our airborne pursuers.

I felt a strong urge to do something, but there wasn't anything I could do without exposing my real identity. I had run out of my regular arrows an hour ago, and unless I felt like explaining how I could summon weapons (whether they be regular or celestial silver), I had to stay put. I felt guilty for holding back, but no matter how bad the circumstances I was in now, I'd be in a worse one with Mercury if I revealed who I was.

Michael was having a hard time. We had just broke past the toll booth, and were racing down the Golden Gate Bridge. The sun was just starting to rise, and it was getting close to rush hour. Cars were honking at us, and others crashed as the van forced its way through. We were slowly losing sight of the ground pursuers, but the griffons were relentless. Then, we felt one of them land on the roof of the van.

Leila screamed as a talon broke through the back window, and Nathan quickly pushed her down as the claw nearly sliced her arm. I quickly had my daggers in my hands and lunged to slash the opposing appendage. The griffon was forced to let go, but not before another flew right in front of the van. The windshield cracked, and Michael, who couldn't see, had unintentionally slammed the car against another one, causing the door on Jacob's side to break and fly off. Gusts of wind poured in, and Jacob screamed in horror as he nearly flew out if Jason hadn't grabbed a hold of his good arm.

"Jake!" Jason shouted amidst the chaos. "I got you- don't let go- I got you!"

The legacy of Victoria whimpered as he grasped Jason's hand like a lifeline, and as he was being dragged back inside, another griffon had attempted to make a snatch at the boy before Michael rammed it against the car. We were on the side lane, and so the griffon was stuck between the bridge and the van, the abrasions causing it to give a piercing screech before it disintegrated into golden dust.
In that brief moment of relapse, the GPS sounded:

*In 200 yards, prepare to make a sharp left.*

"How soon do we reach Camp Jupiter?" I asked.

Michael gritted his teeth, his hands trembling against the steering wheel. "Not soon enough."

"My arrows are out," Nathan announced. "Jason, I hate to ask this-!"

Before he finished his sentence, Jason had flown out of the car. The rest of the griffons followed after him, and outside, I could see a blurry figure flying in zigzag formation as six other griffons gave chase. There were still two griffons who clung to the van like glue, and once we were off the bridge, Michael turned a sharp left, causing a griffon to crash into traffic wires before tugging itself free.

We were driving through a neighborhood, one of those really nice ones with single family houses and green lawns and perfectly trimmed hedges and trees. In the back, Leila had recovered from her shock.

"*Take this, you oversized chicken!*" she yelled. With an outstretched hand, she willed one of the trees to bend and smack one of the griffons away, like a bug swatter would do to a fly. The griffon quickly vanished.

Nathan gave her a peck on her forehead. "That's my girl!"

"Get a room," Jacob muttered, rolling his eyes. The car hit a bump, and I noticed how he clutched his injured arm closer, clenching his mouth tightly as if to silence out the pain. His skin had gone noticeably paler, and he was sweating.

*He needs to see a medic,* I thought. I quickly took out the last of my ambrosia cakes. Jacob needed it more than I did, and I held it up to his mouth. "Swallow this." Jacob opened his mouth willingly, his head rested against my arm as he chewed.

*In 250 yards, keep right.*

Just as the car made a turn, the roof of the car was penetrated by sharp talons. I heard Michael curse loudly as the van was lifted off the ground. I had to secure Jacob in my grasp for fear of him falling out the unhinged opening. There was yelling as the griffon dropped the van, and gravity pulled us into a violent tumble. For a moment, I couldn't think. I heard the glass shatter all around, and I remembered my body shielding the boy, my face lowered. I saw only darkness and I thought I heard the sound of Jason's screams...

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Jason thought his heart had stopped.

He had dispatched another of his foes with a sword thrust, frying the crap out of the monster before he realized the remaining griffons had turned their attention to his friends. He sought to aid them, but another griffin had stopped him. He flew down, avoiding its sharp claws narrowly, trying to fly past it. His wrist was aching, and his shirt and pants had tears. His face was burning against the cold, an old sensation, and he felt dried blood on his face. He manipulated the winds at his command, going ever faster before he turned into a dead end. The griffon was hot on his trail, and just when his body was going to hit the brick wall, he swerved up. The monster crashed against the wall, damaging the housing complex inside. He didn't have time to see the mortals start coming out and pointing fingers when Jason circled back to where he last saw the van.
When his blue eyes finally spotted it, the van was being dragged into the air by two griffons. Jason felt his lungs bursting as he raged, and his heart seemed to plummet along with the battered van, which still contained the rest of his team. By instinct, Jason tried to ease the fall. The van crashed head onto the concrete, tumbling over once, twice, before Jason used all his energy to control the winds, halting the van's destructive path.

He flew towards the van quickly. The last two griffons were on top of it, trying to scavenge the ruins before Jason angrily charged up his javelin, and sent another bolt of lightning at one of the monsters. The monster screeched before it exploded into gold dust, and the last one charged at him. Jason barely defended himself against the attack. His fatigue had finally caught up with him, and he found himself panting, and his brain was registering the injuries he had sustained during the fight. His body felt heavier, wearier. Jason cursed at his rotten luck—why did his adrenaline have to die on him now?

He had to reach his friends, and to do that, he needed to kill this beast. He stood in front of the van, his javelin pointed upright. There was only one of them, but his dizzy mind made him believe there were many. Jason didn't know if he could defend against another attack, but he had to. Pluto's realm would freeze over before the praetor allowed his friends to be at this monster's mercy. He'd defend them to his last breath.

The griffon flew up and around, and then it soared down. Its speed so fast that Jason couldn't read its movements. He raised his sword, intending to block...

...before something silver flashed past his face and pierced the griffon's neck.

Jason blinked in surprise, his knees giving out as the creature squawked and clawed the ground, trying to fly up before more silver flashes—arrows, he finally made out—embedded themselves into the monster. The griffon gave one last screech before it keeled over, its body dissolving into particles.

He stared at the monster, dumbfounded before he slowly turned around.

Hadrian Chase was a bloody mess. His clothes were in shreds, and there were glass shards in his bare arms. His face was drenched in red, his auburn hair sticking out all over. Yet, despite all his apparent wounds, he still managed to stand upright, and he held a long three foot wide silver bow in offense position. Jason watched in disbelief as Hadrian lowered his weapon, his arm pressed against the van for support before the silver weapon vanished in his hand. Hadrian's eyes were narrowed, and they glowed an eerie silver. Jason noticed how he kept his gaze on the griffon's corpse, as if...fascinated.

When Hadrian had finished analyzing the griffon, he turned his gaze on Jason.

The two of them stared at each other. Jason struggled to come up with something to say. That bow he had...Jason recognized it as one belonging to the Hunters of Diana. How had he come by them? Why did he not use them before? What else had he been hiding?

Was he really a 'weapon' like Terminus had claimed him to be?

No matter how many questions he wanted to ask, Jason couldn't bring himself to say them. He wondered if he was in shock, or simply overwhelmed, but there was also a part of him that begrudgingly understood.

Hadrian broke the silence. "Are you okay?"

Jason nodded. "Y-yeah." He swallowed uncomfortably, and then remembered. "A-are any of
"They're alive," he said, his eyes downcast. "I checked their pulses before I...you know." He trailed off, and turned his back to Jason as he pried opened a door. "Help me get them out. Most of them only lost consciousness, but I think Michael's in really bad shape..."

"Okay."

Hadrian had been right. The two of them quickly dragged the rest of their team out of the van. Jacob had only gained a light hit on his head and minor cuts, and was only out cold due to his injured arm. Both Nathan and Leila, who were sitting in the back, had long bloody gashes and bruises, more prominent on Nathan, who had also twisted his dominant arm. Michael, who was in the driver's seat, and therefore had the brunt of the attack, was in the worst condition. He suffered a concussion, there were cuts all over his face, and one of his legs was broken. One of the larger glass shards had also impaled his abdomen. He was still out cold while the others slightly stirred in their sleep.

Hadrian had set to work, taking out medicinal bandages, gauze, and other supplies the van had. He treated Michael first, before moving on to take care of Jacob's arm, and then Nathan and Leila. Jason could only help Hadrian by handing him what he asked. He didn't have any knowledge in healing at all, and for the first time, Jason felt incompetent. Hadrian's hands remained steady, but his wounds were still untreated. The blood on his face had dried.

When Hadrian was about to treat him next, Jason protested. "You're in a worst condition than me. Treat yourself first."

Hadrian seemed to notice his own injuries for the first time. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not!" Jason didn't even realize he was raising his voice. "I don't even know how you're up and walking and doing all this, you should be resting with them-!"

"It only looks bad," Hadrian reassured. He gestured at his bloodied face before wiping some off with his sleeve, and to Jason's horror, started plucking out the shards in his arms with his fingers before Jason stopped him.

"Quit doing that!" Jason said, tugging his hand away. "Aren't you afraid of infection?"

"No," he said bluntly. "That won't happen with me."

Jason stared at him, disbelief was evident on his face. Hadrian sighed, and lifted his arm up.

"I heal fast," Hadrian said. Jason almost gave a snort, thinking Hadrian was only being stubborn, before he realized he was serious. "Just look."

Hesitantly, he did. For a moment, Hadrian's arm was littered with cuts, and there was still glass embedded in his skin. However, the bleeding stopped, and the punctured holes slowly, almost miraculously, closed up, leaving pink scar tissue before those faded away a minute later. If not for the other glass shards still stuck, his arm looked completely unharmed. The entire process took less than five minutes. Jason's mouth was agape, and without meaning to, he moved away from Hadrian cautiously.

He's like Wolverine, Jason thought.

Hadrian noticed. "You're scared of me." He had said it very quietly, and without waiting for a reply, he looked down at his arms, his hair covering his eyes. He continued to pluck out the rest of the shards, the gesture almost...mindless, like he was picking flowers in a field instead of sharp glass.
Does he not feel any pain? Jason wondered, and briefly, the praetor was reminded of his conversations with Reyna and Terminus.

"Hadrian Chase is dangerous," Reyna had said. "If you even think that there's a possibility of him turning on you, then you have permission." Permission to take him out was what she meant.

"We don't know him," he had defended. "We can't determine that just by observation."

Jason had thought it was unfair of Reyna to judge Hadrian as a danger when she rarely interacted with said person. Not like he did. If Hadrian had really meant any harm, Jason believed he would have been able to tell. He was a people person, and his inner judgment had never failed him. He tried telling this to Reyna, who only took his words with a grain of salt and reminded him again to be careful.

His conversation with Terminus went the same way.

"Why did you call him a weapon, Lord Terminus?" he had asked.

Terminus snorted, like the question was ridiculous. "Because he is!" Jason scowled.

"Hadrian is a PERSON," Jason said, "just like any of us. Look, I know he insulted you, but it shouldn't have warrant such a label."

Somehow, Jason felt insulted, not just for Hadrian's sake, but because it almost touched a personal nerve. Jason knew that because his father was the King of the gods, a lot was to be expected of him. He knew what it felt like to shoulder responsibility, and being forced into a role you never asked for. He also had no delusions of his father ever seeing him, for it was an unspoken rule that gods never interacted with the Legion unless they wanted something, treating each of them like tools.

Terminus had regarded him carefully, like he could tell what had crossed Jason's mind. "He's not the same as you, praetor. He's a danger that cannot be overlooked."

Yeah, like calling him a weapon would make him more docile, Jason had thought sarcastically.

"He's a PERSON," he had insisted, "being called a 'weapon' is dehumanizing. Unless you can explain why-!"

"I can't," the god muttered.

"What?"

"It's not in my jurisdiction to reveal what I know," the god whispered. For a moment, the statue god even looked nervous, as if afraid someone would overhear them. "But mark my words, Jason Grace—the one you know as 'Hadrian Chase' isn't to be underestimated. If you knew of the things he's capable of...you wouldn't be within a 100 yards of him."

Jason would admit later that the warning had spooked him a little, but at the time, he had brushed it off.

"I'll decide that on my own."

Now, Jason was on the verge of figuring Hadrian out, and even though his enhanced healing had taken him off guard, Hadrian had done nothing but help the team. He took care of each of their needs before his own, and had done above what Jason had expected of him. Hadrian had earned nothing short of his respect and friendship, and he wasn't going to let Reyna or Terminus' warnings
determine his treatment of him.

"You can tell me, you know," Jason offered. Hadrian looked up at him warily. "Whatever it is that you think you have to hide, I promise I won't tell anyone."

Hadrian didn't reply, in fact, he remained silent for so long that Jason thought he didn't hear him. They were seated in the grass, the van just meters away, tucked beneath a small bridge. Jason noticed Jacob fidgeting in his sleep, but he looked warmer under the blankets he and Hadrian had placed over their comrades. Hadrian had also given each of them pillows. Jason didn't remember seeing spare pillows in the van.

"Do you..." Jason looked up as Hadrian finally spoke, his voice sounded tentative and unsure. "Do you know what it's like to be different?"

Jason wasn't sure if the question was rhetorical, but he nodded anyway. Not one day has passed without reminding him of how much he stood out among the Legion or even just his inner circle of friends. Whether it was ability, parentage, or character, people were drawn to Jason, son of Jupiter, praetor of the Legion. Even his titles sounded too flowery to him. The Fifth Cohort, the Senate, and even Reyna saw him as different, someone who was the epitome of hope and change. He hated it. He hated how people saw him as a perfect icon, one who could do no wrong. He didn't want to bear the burden of their limitless expectations.

"I am different, Jason," Hadrian whispered, "and it's not a type of different that gets me a lot of fans. It's not a 'good' different like what you're experiencing."

Jason didn't answer, but he was startled by how Hadrian had read him so easily.

"It's not to say that your predicament is any better than mine. It's not," he amended. "But while your differences make you look...special, idolized even-my differences will cause people to reject me, out of fear or jealousy it doesn't matter which." He swallowed uncomfortably, his eyes-Jason noticed that they were silver- were glazed over. "People don't like things that are different from them, especially when they pose a threat."

Again, Jason was reminded of his conversation with Terminus and Reyna. He had to know...

"Why?" he said. "Why would you pose a threat?"

Who are you, Hadrian Chase?

"I...I haven't been completely honest with you," Hadrian admitted. "You saw my weapon earlier, didn't you?" He nodded. "I didn't want to show it to you, but if I hadn't, I feared that you would have been killed."

"Your weapon...it looked like one of the bows Lady Diana's hunters would use," Jason recalled.

Hadrian smiled briefly. "It's the same."

Oh...

"There's an elephant in the room," Hadrian said dryly. He had taken out some bandages, and at his prodding, Jason finally let Hadrian treat him. "Go ahead, Jason. Give your best guess."

Jason sucked in a breath, and as Hadrian dabbed his injuries, he discreetly took in his sharp features, the auburn hair, and of course, the silver eyes that had glowed ominously. He also remembered his archery and dual wielding skills, as well as seeing his combat moves that leaned towards stealth than
power. To top it all off, there was his augury that literally revealed the answer...

He felt like an idiot. Even if he never met her, his skills made it blatantly obvious.

"You're a son of Diana," Jason said quietly. He glanced at his sleeping companions, in case they overheard him. They remained immobile. "Apollo is your uncle, not your father."

He felt Hadrian's hands still before they picked up again. His silence confirmed it.

"There's nothing wrong with that," Jason said, feeling the need to reassure him. Hadrian shook his head.

"Everything is wrong," he insisted. "Jason, Diana didn't make me because she felt like it. She didn't wake up one day and thought, 'Hey, I wonder what it's like to have a kid. Maybe I'll even try having a son!'—no, because that would be absurd. Diana hates us, the male race. She despises us, and if I wasn't what I was, she'd hate me no less than the next guy. The truth is, my mother made me because she was under a forced obligation, and under those circumstances, I can never hope to gain her approval. I'm lucky to still be alive."

Jason hesitated, "she...she wants to kill you?"

He shook his head. "It's not like that. I don't hate her, and...I don't think she hates me either. She tolerates my presence. I even met her." He seemed to give a shadow of a smile, reminiscing. "She's everything I've expected and more." Hadrian tightened the bandages on his left forearm until Jason winced. Hadrian loosened it just right before tying the ends.

Jason reflected back on what Hadrian had said, and noticed something. "You keep saying she 'made' you." Hadrian's face paled, like he hadn't meant to reveal that. Jason sighed. "I don't care about any of that stuff, Hadrian. I don't care if you're born, made, or if you had suddenly sprung forth from a rock—it doesn't matter."

"How can it not?" he said quietly. He looked up at Jason, his face clearly desperate for an answer, something that could give him reassurance, because it was something he needed to hear. "In a world like ours, heritage is the first thing people see. You of all people should know that."

Unfortunately, Jason did, but it didn't stop him from convincing Hadrian otherwise. "That's true, but our heritage is kind of an icebreaker. It can't be avoided, but it allows people to get to know you from a distance until you allow them in, get to know you personally. By doing that, people would start to see us for who we are, not by our parents."

Hadrian was quiet. He moved beside Jason's other arm, and started the process over again. He seemed too transfixed by the bandages, like his silver eyes were purposely keeping themselves occupied, away from Jason's stare. "Lift your sleeve up some more."

"You say you're a son of Diana, right? How are you so good at healing?"

Hadrian shrugged. "I'm special."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Fine, don't tell me, but seriously though-just know that I'm willing to lend an ear if you need it." Hadrian stopped moving.

"I wonder about you, Jason," he replied. "How can you handle so many things at once? Doesn't it overwhelm you?"
The son of Jupiter looked down at his lap. "It's not easy. I had a hard time in the beginning, and I still do. Leaders...we're expected to do a lot and not fail. We're expected to make the right decisions, and sometimes the people who depend on us don't treat us as infallible human beings. But I have Reyna, and all of our friends in the Fifth Cohort to support me." He smiled at the thought. "Gods know I would have broken down without their help. They rely on me, but I also rely on them. It's a two-way street."

Hadrian scowled. "You depend on people?" Jason frowned at his disgruntled tone. He noticed how Hadrian looked almost disgusted by the thought, like he had shoved something vile down his throat.

"Yeah," he said. "What's wrong with that?"

"It's...cheap."

Jason was incredulous, not expecting the word. "Cheap?"

"Using your friends as your support," he clarified. "It's cheap. By depending on them so much, you're not only looking down on your own abilities, but you're also exploiting their kindness."

"I...I'm not exploiting my friends!" he exclaimed defensively.

"Depends on the context," Hadrian muttered. "If you got their permission to use their help, then it wouldn't be exploitation. Like how you recruited all of us. But using them to make decisions while they're unaware...how is that not a form of exploitation?"

"It's called being considerate," Jason argued. "How in the world did you mistake that for exploitation?"

"I'll admit that I'm a hardcore cynic when it comes to human behavior," Hadrian whispered. He looked apologetic. "Forgive me if my questions were inappropriate. I had to make sure that you had good intentions, Jason. I'm glad you're a good person. Someone trustworthy."

Jason blinked at the compliments. Hadrian had just gone from probing to apologetic to cajolery under a minute. "Thanks?"

Hadrian nodded. "You make a good conversationalist, Jason Grace. I'm...glad that I chose to open up to you."

"Yeah, anytime," he mumbled, "but why did you chose to tell me?"

"You remind me of her."

"Her?"

"A good friend of mine," Hadrian said wistfully. "The two of you are similar in many ways. It made it easy for me to speak to you. Maybe you'll meet her one day. She's currently my mother's lieutenant."

If Jason wasn't seeing things, he would have sworn Hadrian looked amused when he said that.

"How are you all going to get to Camp Jupiter?" Hadrian asked.

"There are dispensable phones in the van," Jason informed. "I should start making some calls." He got up slowly, most of his wounds were already wrapped up thanks to the son of Diana, and the ones that were left untreated were in the process of recovery. He pulled out a flip phone and dialed the
correct numbers. It should be sending a signal now. "You're leaving us, aren't you?"

Hadrian nodded once, and stood up. "I've overstayed my welcome."

"You're leaving now?" Jason questioned when he saw Hadrian turn his back. "You're not going to wait for the others to wake up?" The son of Diana halted.

"It's for the best," Hadrian replied. "I've done what I can. I'm not needed here anymore."

"Where will you go?" Jason said. "You know, I never believed for a second that you've been traveling this whole time. It's clear that you were trained very well."

"You think so?"

"Definitely."

Then, much to Jason's surprise, Hadrian drew his head back and laughed. His shoulders shook as he did so, and when he finally looked back at him, his silver eyes were full of mirth. Jason couldn't help but smile back. Laughter was contagious.

"You're too nosy for your own good," Hadrian smirked. "I'll see you around, Jason. Oh, and by the way—you better help Michael up. He's about to choke on his own spit."

Jason heard someone cough violently, and when he turned around, he saw Michael attempted to sit up, but failing. The praetor quickly moved to help the son of Venus sit up straight, patting his back repetitively until Michael gasped.

"Are you alright?" Jason said, worried.

Michael winced. "Not at my best, praetor, but I'll live." He looked around, looking confused.

"Where's Hadrian?"

"Hadrian? He's..." Jason turned around, but he knew he wasn't going to see Hadrian there. The son of Diana was true to his word. He had left before the others could wake up. He looked back at Michael, disappointed. "He's gone."

Michael was silent, his gaze knowing, and he looked like he had questions but held back. "That sucks. I wanted to thank him. He's the one who treated us?"

Jason nodded solemnly. "Yeah."

"Well, remind me next time I see him, I owe him one," Michael said.

"You think we'll see him again?" Jason questioned.

Michael gave a smile. "He said so himself."

_I'll see you around, Jason._

"You overheard us?" Jason said, suddenly looking worried. How much did Michael hear? His friend only placed a hand on his shoulder, as if to deflect his worries.

"It doesn't change anything," Michael said softly. "Hadrian Chase has proven himself to be our ally, and I'll treat him as such. I could care less how our parents would think."

Jason felt lightened by his words. "Thanks, Mike." He noticed the others have started to wake up
slowly, blinking the drowsiness out of their eyes. Then, he heard the sound of a car approaching, and recognized the driver to be one of the Legion's scouts. Reyna has answered his call.

"Let's go home."

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Chapter End Notes

*I figured that if anyone was able to comprehend Hunter's situation, it would be Jason. As explained in this chapter, Jason understands what it's like to be forced into a role he doesn't want, and from what I've read in HOH, Jason's also the type of person to be very accepting, as seen when he found out about Nico's sexuality. His accepting nature, as well as his similarities to Thalia, was what prompted Hunter to open up to him.

A/N: This chapter concludes the 'Roman Arc'. As Hunter had said during his departure, this isn't the last you guys will see of Jason and the other Romans. Seth Hunter will be returning to Walt and Lynetta and taking the final test. The next few chapters will be shifting to Seth's POV. Leave me your thoughts, comments, and predictions in your review! Thanks for reading!
Chains

Chapter Summary

In which Seth and Hunter are both stubborn, hard-headed personalities and like to think themselves right.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"You're too nosy for your own good," I smirked. "I'll see you around, Jason. Oh, and by the way—you better help Michael up. He's about to choke on his own spit."

At this, both of us heard said person make a chortling noise as he struggled to sit up. I watched Jason rush over to his companion's side before I quickly ran up the side of a steep hill, and up the bridge that loomed over the rest of the Romans. I stayed hidden from view, and I overheard Jason and Michael's conversation. I was surprised by how accepting the son of Venus was. I knew he had been awake for a while, but I chose not to mention it because I didn't want to hear what he thought of me. I had assumed the worst, believing that Michael would hate me, if not despise me for who I was. To say I was relieved of being wrong was an understatement.

Silently, I watched them all get up and move into the newly arrived vehicles. I heard Jacob asking Jason where I had went, and I almost felt bad when I saw his disappointment. The young boy still clutched his arm close, but his countenance looked healthier, and I was glad for his sake. I looked on as the doors slammed shut, and the cars slowly drove away, leaving me behind. I kept on looking until they vanished out of sight.

I sat down, breathed, and slowly recollected what had happened. I had given myself away. Intentionally. I still couldn't believe I had done that. I had panicked when I saw the last griffon attack Jason, and instead of summoning my regular bow (which I should have done)—my silver bow had appeared instead. After experiencing my first car crash, my mind was disoriented and I assumed that was the reason why my regular bow didn't appear; I wasn't focused enough. By the time I realized the mistake, Jason had already seen me and I knew another interrogation was unavoidable.

What followed after, however, didn't feel like an interrogation. Jason was very...understanding. I had assumed he'd be asking me questions left and right, no doubt reporting them to Reyna later, but he didn't. He had promised me he wouldn't, and he sounded so sure, so honest, that I didn't ask him to swear on the Styx. My cynical mind told me that Jason could be manipulating me to spill my secrets, but after spending a lot of time with him, I didn't believe that. He didn't seem like the type to do such a thing. Perhaps I was being naïve, but I genuinely believed Jason had my interests in mind, and that feeling of trust was foreign to me. It felt incredibly...good—light-heartening, even—to be able to share my deepest struggles to someone who understood where I was coming from. It was like there were these invisible chains squeezing the life out of my heart, and Jason had managed to loosen one.

I sighed, and felt a nice cool breeze come by. When I looked up, it was brighter. The sun has risen, and I could see the sparkling water and Golden Gate Bridge on the horizon, the sound of cars and seagulls creating a soothing melody. In that brief instant, I was content and my lips formed a smile.

You're a good man, Jason, I thought, smiling still. Camp Jupiter is lucky to have you as its leader.
When the worst of my injuries have healed, I got up and walked back down. I put my hood up, the ends of my jacket torn from making Jacob’s makeshift bandage, and my jeans were ripped and dirtied from the crash. I probably looked like a homeless kid, and I didn't care in the slightest. I kept my aura down and kept walking, starting to sense something familiar. After walking alone for a couple of minutes, that nagging feeling I had was confirmed.

"I know you're there," I said aloud. "You can come out now. Don't you know it's rude to stalk someone, Lappy?"

I heard footsteps, and I saw a large shadow engulf mine. I didn't need to look up to know the bloodhound was towering above me.

*It's my duty to make sure you are safe, Hunter*, Lappy growled. I turned around and smirked at him.

"Your duty. Right. How long have you been tailing me?" I inquired.

*Since you came out of Camp Jupiter*, the large mutt said, snarling. *I saw what you did to that boy, Hunter. The one you murdered.*

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, back up for a second," I said angrily. My good mood vanished, but I should have expected that when it came to Lappy and me. "I'm not a murderer! I didn't kill that boy because I had a personal vendetta. He was an *enemy*, and we were on a battlefield. Death was inevitable, and my actions were for the good of the Legion."

*It was personal*, Lappy argued. *That boy would have lived if you had left him alone after you had pulled that stunt. I don't blame you for the deaths caused by your explosion. You had issued a warning, and you had a greater purpose in mind. But when you decided to linger and play judge, jury, and executioner instead of running to help your comrades...it became personal.*

I snorted. "That wasn't personal, you mutt. I was finishing what I had started-!"

*Your job was FINISHED when escape was possible.* Lappy retorted. *The goal was to create a distraction, and the explosion served to finish that goal. What you did after was done out of selfishness.*

"Selfishness," I repeated, my eyes were downcast before I started laughing. Selfishness! Hilarious! Lappy has no idea what I've done or plan to do, and the pure irony got me cackling with undying laughter. I bent down slightly, my bruised chest was hurting and I forced myself to calm down. Oh Lappy...you and Seth were seeds in a pod. So judging, so irrational and narrow-minded and ignorant.

"Tell me, Lappy," I addressed with mock-politeness. I noticed how Lappy had taken a step back during my time of mirth. I was flattered. "Tell me what I, Seth Hunter, plan to do after we leave Walt and Lynetta."

*You plan to join the Titan Army to serve as Camp Half-Blood's spy.*

"That's correct. Now answer me again: what was that boy's affiliation?"

Lappy's eyes narrowed, wondering where I was going with this. *The Titans.*

"Correct," I stated, "so Lappy, if you knew all this..." Then, I said the next few words mentally, in case anyone (gods and titans included) overheard. *Why should I risk jeopardizing that role by letting one of their initiates, who has seen my face, LIVE?*
I grinned when I heard the dog's heart start faltering. After dropping the bomb on him-figuratively-I had expected no less, but it still felt immensely satisfying. "It wasn't personal, Lappy, but I can see how your blatant narrow-mindedness blinded you from that. You only think one step ahead. Me? It's always five. You accused me of not taking things seriously, but you guessed wrong."

"I do take things seriously, all matters considered," I said coldly. "I know you think I don't, but I do. I just learned not to be so uptight about it, look at things more...confidently. Have a little fun while I'm at it. If having fun is the equivalent of being relaxed and sidetracked off of important matters, then you can go shove that thinking up your ass!"

To his credit, Lappy didn't flinch. "I'm not against 'having fun', Hunter. Having fun is a part of living a good life, but I find that your type of 'fun' doesn't match the norm. You need to maintain better self-control, Hunter, and listen when others give you advice. I know you don't like criticism, especially when it's from me, but I'm only telling you this to HELP you."

I crossed my arms, and sneered. "Gee, I don't know. I had the feeling you never liked me much. I know you prefer Seth over me. He's easier to take care of isn't he? Help me? Please. Last time, you were telling Seth just how much of a threat I was. Thanks but no thanks."

"You are walking down a dangerous path, Hunter," Lappy warned, "a path that leads to nothing but suffering and regret. You deserve BETTER than that! You NEED to turn back while you still can!"

"I won't drag Seth down," I said quietly. "I know what I'm doing. Everything I've done, every single deed I've accomplished since I revealed myself-it's all so I can help Seth the best I can. I've been planning this for very long time. Seth won't get involved."

Because if he knew what I intended to do, I thought, he would either help me or try to stop me, and I don't want to know which one he'll choose.

Lappy wasn't convinced. I wasn't talking about Seth-I was talking about YOU, Hunter. We may not agree on everything, but I sincerely DO wish to help you. In fact, I'm now convinced that you are in more need of help than your counterpart!"

"I don't want it!" I snapped. "I don't need your help or anyone else's! Instead of minding my business, why don't you focus more on Seth?! I may never have needed to show myself if you had paid more attention to him!"

Lappy flinched at the accusation, but he stood his ground. "It's true that I've...failed to be there for Seth when he needed me, but you are just as important!"

"Bullshit!" I said, my voice getting louder by the second. "Quit lying to yourself, Lappy! You despise me and wished that I disappeared! If this is you pitying me-!"

"It's NOT pity!"

"SHUT UP!" I shouted, losing my temper. "I know what pity looks like and I sooner shoot myself than let anyone pity me! Take your damn pity and your damn obligations elsewhere, mutt!"

Unwanted memories started to emerge, and I shook my head violently to get rid of them. I didn't want to be reminded of that...of that place! I forced myself to swallow, and without a word, I turned on my heel and ran from the dog.

I didn't get very far. I felt the dog run past me, and I unintentionally slammed into him. I stumbled and fell flat on my ass. I stared at the obstacle before me balefully.

"Move," I ordered. Lappy looked down at me, but didn't budge. That made me angrier. "I said
move, you damn mutt! Leave me alone!"

I'm here to take you back, Lappy said. So I won't move. I also won't leave you alone because Artemis had told me to accompany you and keep you safe.

I gave a harsh scoff. "You want to keep Seth safe! You don't give a shit about me!"

Then, Lappy had the nerve to look confused. Didn't you say that you and Seth are one and the same? How can I care about Seth and not care about you, Hunter? That wouldn't make any sense.

Shit, I cursed. The mutt got me. He actually got me.

Please come with me, Hunter, Lappy said quietly. Walt and Lynetta are expecting you to return soon, and your mother will be worried if she doesn't see you with me. You've been through a lot, and you're still recovering from that crash. Please, set aside your obstinacy for once and accept my help.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" I muttered. "And don't say it's because I'm Seth. I'm not him right now, and Seth and I are as different as night and day."

I know you're different from Seth, Lappy said, but that doesn't mean I hold Seth in a higher regard than you.

"Why not?" I said bitterly. "He's better than me. I know it and you know it."

The bloodhound's eyes were indiscernible when he answered. You're you, Hunter, and Seth is Seth. Neither of you are better nor worse than the other. I would never compare the two of you and see one of you as the inferior. I may not like some of the things you do, but I'll accept you as you are.

I tried not to show it, but I could feel my cheeks getting warm. Unconsciously, I wrapped my arms around my knees, and planted my face down. This was stupid. It was pathetic. I was not affected by the mutt's words of encouragement. I was not.

Even so, I could feel another one of those invisible chains lose its grasp around my heart.

Without another word, I climbed on top of Lappy, and sat down.

-o-

I must have fallen asleep along the way when I saw the inner room.

I took a look around the dark, morose place. Nothing's change since I was last in here, but the lights seemed to have gone dimmer. I walked forward, hearing the click clack sounds of my combat boots on the marble floor. I was dressed differently this time. Instead of the standard dress shirt and tie, I was in uniform. There was a belt tied around my waist, and a couple medallions hanging off my chest pocket. I had on dark trousers and straps tied around both thighs. My hands were gloved, and even my hair was parted differently underneath my cap. I guessed I was feeling like a veteran today. The clothes I wore in here always matched with my moods.

"You broke your promise."

My eyes narrowed when I finally saw my counterpart. He was seated in a grand chair, his arms crossed, looking very stern. I also noticed how he was dressed entirely in black, showing off no skin besides his pale face. His clothes clung to his lean stature tightly, but were of a flexible fabric that didn't hinder movement. He also had on gloves-black leather instead of polyester white- and combat boots. I was immediately wary of him. If I was the veteran, then Seth would be like the dancer or...
He uncrossed his arms, his hands gripping the chair very tightly as he leaned forward. His silver eyes glowed dangerously.

...or like an assassin poised to strike. I gave an uneasy smile and swallowed uncomfortably. Seth was angry. Not pissed off or annoyed—that I could deal with—but really, really angry. It was terrifying, and I didn't use that word lightly. Many are deluded of what Seth's full capabilities are because most people don't know my counterpart held back. Besides Artemis, no one has seen Seth go all out. He has always kept himself in check during most of his fights for reasons beyond me, but I had a bad feeling that self-restraint didn't apply here.

"Which promise would that be?" I said in a hushed whisper, afraid to break the tension.

"You promised me that in exchange for my support, you would refrain from using excessive violence," he said quietly. I noticed how his eyes never left mine, like he was analyzing what I could be thinking.

I frowned. "I didn't break that promise, Seth." I tried to shrug it off. Like, what was this, an intervention part two? "Look, Seth, I'm really not in the mood for this. We can discuss this late-!"

"We're discussing this now," Seth cut in, narrowing his eyes even further, if that was possible. I nearly gulped.

"O-Kay then," I said, giving an uneasy smile. "I still don't think I broke that promise."

"What do you call killing two people in the last three days?" Seth growled.

"Self-preservation," I answered. "Like I told Lappy, what I did was for the sake of the Legion. Octavian was a disease, and that little punk was a risk to our future endeavor. I saw the threat, and promptly took them out."

"Those threats were not ours for the taking!" Seth argued. I rolled my eyes.

"Oh, so you want me to kneel there and let Octavian slash my throat?" I said incredulously. "Or perhaps you want me to turn the other cheek and let him carve that side too?"

"You didn't need to kill him!" he yelled, unable to contain his temper any longer. "You could have easily knocked him out cold for a few days straight! You'd be gone by then, and any information he had on us would be useless in the long run! I will not sit by and let you take any more lives away! You dirtied our hands-!"

"It was bound to happen sooner or later!" I yelled back. "War is a nasty business, Seth! Quit daydreaming! I did what we needed to do! Yes, I killed them. Yes, it may not be the most ethical thing to do, but with each kill I saved more lives!"

"You're assuming too much!" he exclaimed. "You can't determine what another person could do! It just doesn't work that way! We're not a freaking Oracle or one of the Fates! It's not our right-!"

"Rights, rights, rights!" I mocked. "It's always about rights! Ethics! Well, screw all that! The dead don't give a shit about ethics! I kept us alive, Seth! Did you forget what that son of a bitch tried to do to us, huh?! He started shooting at us the moment he got the chance! That bastard had-!"

Seth interrupted, his voice a harsh whisper. "Patrick."

I blinked, perplexed. "What?"
Seth glared at me. "It's not 'punk' or 'son of a bitch' or 'bastard'-the boy's name is Patrick. He's a young boy, barely in his preteens. A human being who is fallible and makes mistakes and capable of regret. He had regretted his actions, and he tried to convince you, but you stubbornly chose not to listen."

"Good thing I didn't," I sneered, "the little shit was a backstabbing traitor. So what?"

"He became desperate," Seth said. "I thought about what had happened, and I concluded that after Patrick knew you were going to kill him, when he had no chance of persuading you otherwise, he had to take matters into his own hands to protect himself. Self-preservation. Just like you said, Hunter."

I stared at Seth, who seemed very certain of his analysis, and kept on staring. My mouth was agape, and suddenly, I felt like my chest was filled with poisonous lead. I started to have trouble breathing, and I felt pain settle inside me. I was in utter disbelief, and I felt those chains multiply in number and start to squeeze me dry. Never in my whole existence had I been so hurt by such nonsense.

He would rather side with an enemy that tried to KILL us... than ME?! I clenched my fists. My head was pounding, like my whole body was about to explode. What was I to Seth? He obviously didn't care about me as I did him. Talk about unfair. Still, I struggled to keep my temper in, and not fall for Seth's attempt of riling me up.

I must have been silent for too long when Seth prodded, "Hunter, did you hear what I said?"

I swallowed uncomfortably, and forcibly put a damper on the sudden pain in my chest. I schooled my face, lifted a hand to scratch the back of my head, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Sorry, could you repeat that again? I had a hard time hearing you over the sound of your damn bullshit."

Seth snapped. "I'm not joking around, Hunter-!"

"Do I sound like I'm joking to you?!" I shouted, beyond pissed. "You're the one that's taking my words lightly and shoving them back up my face! I've listened to what you've said, and it isn't the least bit convincing."

"You're not seeing the bigger picture!" Seth said back. "We're not just dealing with mortals here! The gods are already walking on eggshells around us! You're giving them the perfect excuse to take us out once we've outlived our usefulness!"

"And what excuse is that?" I replied. "Whether I kill somebody or take a shit, the gods already think we're a menace! We're already on their radar! If the gods really cared about who I killed, then they would have done something already!"

"You overestimate their apathy," Seth growled, moving to stand up from his chair. "Perhaps they can't do anything because of the ancient laws, or maybe they don't care, but if you continue to commit these hideous acts, the gods will find a reason to stop you."

Find a reason to stop...

I started to chuckle, not seeing how Seth took a step back. "You're delusional."

"What?"

"The gods are not saints. They are not just. For millennia, the gods have killed and punished their own for less honorable reasons than I have, and that's not likely going to change."
"Do you really think they're going to stop me when there's no benefit to be had?" I challenged.
"Think about it- the only reason why they step in at all is to make sure their thrones remain standing. Why did the gods almost start a war over Zeus' master bolt? Why was a Quest issued to retrieve the Golden Fleece? It's all about maintaining the current order! Their authority! They are a corrupt justice system."

Seth gritted his teeth, but he had nothing to say against that. He knew what I knew, but he just didn't have the guts to acknowledge it. "You sound like a Titan supporter," he said in disgust.

I shrugged. "Perhaps, but I'm not so ignorant as to join them. The gods may have their faults, but they at least give mortals and demigods free will to a certain degree. They also don't get involved unless they have to. The Titans want to take over everything, and destroy everything else that doesn't match their vision. There would be no freedom. I would never support such tyranny."

"So the gods aren't perfect," Seth surmised, looking impatient. "That's common knowledge. What's your point?"

"The point, Seth, is that any actions I've taken thus far do not put the gods at risk," I smirked. "They are not grandiose enough to disrupt the current order, and I don't plan on changing that. The gods will not stop me."

"They may not," Seth said, "but I will!"

Suddenly, knives materialized in Seth's hands so fast that I couldn't blink. I moved my head to the side, as one flew right past my face before Seth willed the knife back to his hand again. I lifted my arms to defend against the onslaught of slashes as Seth continued to attack wildly, giving me no second to retreat. I moved my arms, my hands clenched, to maneuver his weapons away from me. While I was busy, Seth moved—landing a sharp back leg kick to my chest.

I felt my body fly back before instantly flipping my head up front, my feet slamming against the wall in a crouching stance. I used the force of the momentum to propel my whole body forward, wind whipping against my face as I flipped back around, guns appearing in my hands, and aimed to shoot. Seth blocked my shots with his knives, and did a back flip to avoid my hit. The ground beneath me cracked as I landed where my counterpart was a second ago.

I quickly recovered, getting back up and shooting with both guns. Since we were in our inner world, I didn't need to reshuffle my guns unless I imagined them to run out. I kept on shooting, the furniture and table quickly littered with bullets as Seth used them to dodge my attacks. As he planned his next attack behind one of the battered couches, I decided to stop shooting and try to reason with him.

"Why are you angry?" I questioned. "Each kill is my own, my decision. It shouldn't affect your conscious."

"It's the same thing!" Seth argued. "Your conscious, my conscious—it doesn't matter! We still share one body, and if someone with a grudge were to come along and take out our body, it wouldn't matter whose conscious embodied it last!"

"You're more concerned with future consequences that are improbable," I muttered, "instead of the consequences I've prevented. I stopped Octavian from blackmailing us! I secured our next task! Why can't you be satisfied with that?"

"Because you're becoming an addict!" Seth hissed. "You think what you're doing is right, when it's actually a twisted sense of justice! You started with torturing monsters, then you started killing mortal drug dealers, and now you've escalated to killing demigods! Even children! Fates know what would
happen if I didn't put a stop to this! You have no control!"

My eyes widened before they became enraged. "I HAVE CONTROL!"

"NO, YOU DON'T!"

I heard scuffling sounds behind me. I turned and saw Seth with a mechanical bow, three arrows already notched. I cursed, falling to the ground to avoid all the arrows. A shadow loomed over me, and I rolled out of the way as Seth landed with one foot crushed against the marble floor. Crouching, I quickly swung a leg forward, causing Seth to trip before he did a quick backward tumble to catch himself.

I discarded the guns, instead using a long javelin for a better reach. Seth, meanwhile, had transformed his knives into swords. I switched between offensive and defensive repetitively, neither of us gaining a solid advantage over the other. Seth looked like he had huffed and puffed down too many piggy houses. He was coated in sweat, his teeth clenched in frustration as he kept trying to one up me. I was getting tired too, but it wasn't enough to make me slip. As expected, Seth was good, too good for me to win a quick fight against him. If this fight took place in the real world, we'd be going at each other's throats for hours until one of us called it quits, which would never happen. Seth was too stubborn, and I was too prideful to admit defeat.

Fortunately, since we were in our inner world, I had a trick that could tip the scales.

Seth pushed me back as he clashed his swords against my weapon. With a burst of adrenaline, I shoved him back, and once I was relieved of the pressure, I willed the room to tilt. The floor slowly shifted sideways, allowing me time to stab my javelin to the ground and gain a firm position. The furniture started moving, and crashed against the west wall. Chandeliers snapped and broke, and I saw Seth leap up and grab a hold of one before skidding down and running across the shifting walls and floors, his steps light and fast.

As he got closer, I used my javelin and swung my whole body sideways, successfully slamming my foot against Seth's jaw. Seth cried out, and I used that opening to take out my javelin and tackle my counterpart to the ground, punching his abdomen. Seth quickly recovered, however, and I felt his elbows hit my shoulder blades, forcing me to loosen my hold. I only had a second to recover before his fist slammed against my face.

My bruised cheek stung badly, and my coordination was off. I stumbled against a wall (or was that the floor?) before I rotated the room counter clockwise to avoid Seth's incoming attack. I rolled along the way, allowing myself precious time to heal before I got back up again. Guns appeared in my hands once more as I ran across the room for a better position. Seth kept charging forward, moving sideways, jumping up, or sliding past damaged furniture, completely undeterred while dodging my bullets.

What a pain in the ass, I thought, irritated that my guns were doing nothing to lengthen the distance. Quickly, I shifted the room clockwise, turning the room upside down. I smashed one of the chairs with a drop kick, splintering it into two, and propelled both pieces towards my opponent at once. Seth caught on, and somehow, managing to slip through the narrow gap between both obstacles. I lifted my guns to shoot, but Seth kicked them out of my hands. I only had time to lift my forearm up to block his second roundabout kick, the impact causing my bones to crack.

Shit! I thought frantically. I didn't have time to cradle my broken arm before I felt his foot collide against my chin. I lost focus, my body in mid-air before a hand caught my ankle. I couldn't react as Seth used all his strength to slam my body against a table. The air was knocked out of me, blood
welled up in my mouth as I tumbled against the floor. With my good arm, I lifted myself up as I choked. I turned around just in time to hear the sound of a shuffling gun, and lowered my head just enough to avoid a bullet. Seth had a rifle in his hands, and he was already reshuffling it as I dodged for cover.

*He's not playing around*, I realized, slightly worried. That had been a kill shot, and while I couldn't 'die' here, I'd be out of commission for a while if that earlier hit had landed. If Seth kept going at me like this, then he would eventually overpower me. Most of my attacks were fatal, and despite how much Seth pissed me off, I did promise Artemis not to hurt him (too badly) and so refrained from using them.

Seth was making that promise very difficult to keep.

My arm was in the process of mending itself as I moved. I was crouching low, using the scattered bits and pieces of furniture and chandeliers to block Seth's bullets. Eventually, Seth discarded the long range rifle in favor of Beretta 92s, our favorite firearm—efficient, reliable, and most of all, its comfortable weight and feel.

I slammed my back against a sturdy wall, and again, I tried to talk sense into him. I winced when pain shot up in my arms during the impact. "You're really dead set on stopping me, huh? Whatever happened to working with each other?"

"I don't work with violent psychopaths," Seth retorted. I gave a snort.

"I'm not a psychopath."

"A sociopath then," he said instead. I scoffed incredulously.

"Look who's sounding like a dumbass," I hissed, insulted. "I'm a lot of things, but a psychopath or sociopath isn't one of them!"*

"Studies have proven that those who have an anti-social disorder are more likely to deny it."

"It's not denial, you stubborn asshole!" I yelled. "Quit mocking my beliefs by labeling them under a mental illness! That's an excuse only viable in court and we sure as Hades aren't in court! Or is this petty excuse your way of pushing your ideology over mine?"

"How else could you have gained such beliefs?" Seth shouted. "You claimed that I influenced the way you turned out to be, but I'm starting to think there's something more to that. No matter how negative my emotions get, they can't be enough for you to...t-to become like this!"

"Is that what you say to yourself so you can sleep better every night?" I said, making sure to keep my voice steady. "Sorry that I'm *not* sorry for being the kind of version you'd despise! I thought you valued honesty, Seth."

"I do," Seth said quietly. He sounded calm, and briefly, I wondered if he wanted to stop our fight. "But there's a limit to the amount of cynicism I can accept. I thought I could understand you, Hunter, but no matter how close I get, you'd throw me an oddball."

I rolled my eyes. "What do you not understand? I thought I made it clear that I'm willing to answer any questions you may have other than those regarding my plans."

"I don't want another interview," he muttered. "What I want is a long, meaningful conversation in which we don't have to resort to fighting over who's right or wrong."
"You attacked me first," I pointed out. Seth sighed, sounding troubled.

"I'm trying my best here, Hunter," Seth insisted. "I don't want to keep fighting you all the way. I value cooperation, but you are making it very hard for me to work with you. No matter the reason, I cannot accept murder, and especially not your sadism."

"All because they don't follow your perfect code," I spat. "Admit it, Seth—my methods are efficient! They get the job done the quickest way possible! The results speak for themselves—we are down two enemies, and monsters will soon learn to fear us!"

"They are efficient," Seth decided, "but they are also cruel. I don't want people to fear us, Hunter!"

"They already do!" I retorted. "I'm just following their expectations while warning anyone who dares to get in our way to expect repercussions! I'm not like you, Seth—I won't sit back while schemes are deployed against us. I'm making sure they are halted before they even begin, but you're so drenched in your moral code that you don't realize it!"

"Perhaps you're right," Seth said at last. "Maybe you are preventing us from getting hurt, except this is a two way street you're walking, Hunter! Your so called 'efficient' actions will only bring about more schemes, more enemies for us to deal with! You dissolve one plot today, and more will appear the next! It's a never ending cycle! No matter the preparation, we're only one person, Hunter, and sooner or later, we'll be overwhelmed. I will not allow you to involve me or our friends into your mess!"

"I never asked you to help me," I muttered, "and I don't need your friends. I'm fine with dealing with this on my own."

"I'm involved whether you like it or not!" Seth exclaimed. "Why can't you see that what you're doing isn't going to end the way you expect it to? For now, things may be going well, but that's not going to last!"

"Now you're the presumptuous one," I sneered. "What you lack is faith and the guts to carry out what needs to be done. You're like a novice gambler expecting to win a lot by playing it safe. In order for there to be gain, there needs to be risk."

"You're risking too much!"

"Calculated risk," I specified, "losing little but gaining more. That's how I work. If you can't appreciate that, then you can get the hell out of my face!"

Ignoring the numbing pain in my arm, I charged forward wildly with no guard. Startled, Seth shot multiple times, lodging bullets in my other arm, right thigh, and abdomen. The overwhelming pain didn't deter me, but made me even more exhilarated. This was what you called a match! I leaped upward before crashing my whole body down on my counterpart. He didn't like what I had to say? Well, I guess I'd just have to beat it into him!

I grabbed a hold of Seth's arms, kneeing him in the chest before twisting his arms just enough for him to drop the guns. Seth hissed, head butting me hard. I released my hold as I stumbled back, my orientation off. Seth's eyes flashed dangerously as he closed in and slammed a fist against my abdominal wound. I found myself smiling as blood trailed out of the corners of my mouth. Seth caught my smile, and was in disbelief before summoning dual rapiers. I countered with a javelin, using the length of the weapon to my advantage as we parried back and forth. I spun my weapon rapidly, deflecting Seth's sword attacks with ease. Eventually, I succeeded in colliding the blunt against Seth's exposed waist. He crashed against a wall, and before he could get back up, I snapped
my fingers. The room shifted once more and I heard Seth gasp in pain as the furniture forcibly pinned half his body in place.

While my counterpart slashed his way out, I positioned my javelin just right before hurling it towards my opponent. The lethal end struck just a hair's length away from Seth's stunned face.

"I could have killed you," I said, breathing heavily. I realized most of my tarnished uniform was soaked red from Seth's earlier shots. I was growing delirious. "But I chose not to. That proves that I can control myself."

Seth glared at me. "This isn't proof." He reached up and pulled the javelin out of the wall before snapping the weapon with his free hands, his silver eyes never leaving mine. Then, he used both arms to push the couch away slightly, giving him enough space to kick it out of the way. "Anything you do to me isn't on the same level as how you treat other people."

I watched him dust off his clothes before he snapped his fingers—the furniture, floor, and walls slowly repairing themselves and orienting them back in place. I narrowed my eyes. Seth had learned that trick too? Why didn't he use that skill to escape faster? Did he just pick it up from me? Was it limited? Or was he also holding back on me?

"We're both stubborn assholes," Seth said at last. I snorted, silently agreeing with him. "It's clear that our arguments aren't getting through to the other, and we're obviously in no condition to keep fighting. For now...let us agree to disagree and leave it at that?"

"Sounds good to me," I smirked. I plopped down against the remade armchair before I remembered my bullet wounds. I cursed when my body registered the pain. Out of the corner of my eye, Seth looked almost amused by my outburst before he schooled his features. I rolled my eyes—and he said he didn't approve of sadism.

My counterpart left the room, and I sensed his presence disappear. I closed my eyes briefly, propping my legs up on the table and stretched back in a more comfortable position. I summoned back my cap, and placed it over my face, my hands pressed against my neck. My wounds were healing, and I let out an exhausted sigh.

"I'll leave things to you, Seth," I murmured. "I'll play your game and try things your way; see how it goes. Just don't come crying to me when you realize I was right all along..."

-o-

My head ached when I opened my eyes.

I was seated on Lappy's back, Walt's house coming into view. I looked around, everything felt disorientated as I tried to place where I was. Lappy must have sensed I was awake as he slowed his speed to a casual walk towards the Tudor home.

"We have arrived, Hunter," Lappy said. You were asleep for a long while.

"I'm Seth, Lappy," I corrected, and groaned when my head seemed to ache even more. Lappy's ears seemed to have perked up.

"Oh, of course! I should have known that, Lappy said. I sense you're not at your topmost condition. Is something wrong?"

"Just a headache," I muttered. Lappy crouched, and I slid my legs over to jump down, the impact causing my head to hurt even more. I almost stumbled to the ground if Lappy hadn't caught me in
time. With the way I was walking, anyone would mistake me for a drunk. "Ugh, damn it Hunter..."

Hunter? What happened?

"We argued," I said bluntly, "and we also fought. How long was I out?"

Eight hours. You fell asleep as soon as we got out of California.

Eight hours. I was in that mental room with Hunter for eight hours, and our fight took up a majority of that time. Our fight didn't feel that long—I estimated a half hour at most. I knew the time in that place was skewed, but I didn't think it'd be so different.

What did you argue about?

"A bunch of things," I replied, "but mostly it was me telling him to stop killing people and tone down his violence." I straightened up, my head feeling a bit lighter as the ache slowly diminished. "Hunter, being the stubborn insane prick he is, strongly disagreed with me and even tried to convince me otherwise."

I had insulted Hunter on purpose, checking to see if he'd reply, but strangely, he remained silent. I should have expected it. After our big fight, I could only wonder when my counterpart would start talking back at me again.

Lappy looked thoughtful. And did he convince you?

I shook my head. "I can never support the way he'd take another person's life so casually, even if that person was an enemy. We'd be no better than the Titans. It was just so...so frustrating! The worst part is that his arguments were sound, and logically, they would be correct. Except, not everything can be factored down into logic or statistics or predictions. I don't know how I can get Hunter to understand that. Do you have any ideas, Lappy?"

The bloodhound's eyes were downcast, troubled. I also attempted to convince Hunter to stop, but I failed. Hunter is...he's more complicated than I first believed. The main problem is that his reasoning is in the morally grey area, where the dark and light are always clashing. Some may support his actions, while others would go against him.

"Dark and light," I murmured, realizing how similar Lappy's explanation was compared to the third line of my prophecy: He walks between the shadows and light...could that line be talking about Hunter? The prophecy had already predicted my birth and my conflict with Artemis, it could easily have foreshadowed Hunter's emergence. If that third line was about Hunter, was my future role in the Titan army not needed?! Was I making a mistake?

There was also the fourth line: Only to bring the world under Death's flight...that could also be applied to Hunter's actions, much to my shock. Why did I not realize this sooner?! Everything I've done—my fight with Artemis, sending Chiron those files—was it all for nothing? I had been missing one vital piece of the puzzle, and now that I've become aware of that piece, my previous interpretations could be marked wrong.

Your interpretation leaves room for error, Artemis had told me.

Suddenly, I was short on breath, and I was coughing violently. My heart was pounding rapidly, and my headache returned in full force. My hands and knees were pressed against the ground, and briefly, I thought I heard Lappy speaking to me, but I couldn't hear him.

Then, I felt warm hands on my shoulders, someone telling me to breath. I looked up, and saw

"N-nothing...is...wrong..." I mumbled weakly. "Nothing..."

"That's right," Lynetta said, giving a reassuring smile. I felt my cheek pressed against her shoulder as she enveloped her arms around me. I felt her hand rubbing circles on my back, and another pressed lightly against my hair. "Nothing is wrong, Seth. Relax. Breathe in and breathe out. Everything will be okay..."

Lynetta lifted one of my arms over her neck as she slowly helped me up. My eyes were seeing nothing as I felt Lynetta basically drag my limp body up the porch, through the door, and into the hall. I still heard the sound of my heartbeat beating faster than normal, but it gradually slowed down. I thought I saw Walt peering at us from his workroom before going back inside. Then, I felt that familiar nauseous urge to vomit.

"I...I feel sick," I muttered before I let go of Lynetta and dashed down the hall and into the nearest bathroom. I barely closed the door shut before I lunged over the toilet, puking out everything I had eaten as Hunter during Jason's mission. I haven't felt this sick since that time Percy and Grover coerced me into riding a hippocampi. Worst decision ever.

After what seemed like hours, I finally had enough strength to stand and wash up. I was rinsing my mouth when I heard soft thumping at the door.

Seth, are you okay? Lappy said, clearly worried.

"I'm fine now," I said quietly. "I'm sorry for scaring you. I don't know how, but I suddenly had a panic attack. It's never happened to me before."

Panic attacks were caused by fear and anxiety, and my 'Apollo mind' informed me that staying calm and realizing the situation was vital to stopping panic attacks. There were many times in the past that I have been afraid and more anxious than I was moments ago, but I still maintained my cool. What was so different this time? Was I getting weak?

Thankfully, Lappy didn't ask me to explain what happened, and he walked beside me as I joined Lynetta to give Walt my report. When I finished, the son of Vulcan was stern, his lips were in a tight line and his dark eyes were squinted, forming creases on his forehead. Walt looked pissed off, and I wondered whether it was because Hunter had killed or it was something else.

"So you remember everything you did as Hunter?" he confirmed. I nodded.

"I disagreed with some of things he did, but yes, I remember them," I said quietly. Walt didn't answer, and his silence got to me. "I...about Octavian..."

"It's pointless to discuss that any further," Walt said. "Hunter did what he saw fit, and we can argue over his rights and wrongs all day and get nowhere. That's just another responsibility you'll have to come to accept. What I'm more concerned about was what had happened to you during your arrival."

I swallowed uncomfortably. "I...something Lappy had said...about Hunter being the 'light and dark'...I realized how similar that sounded to my prophecy, and I thought what I've been doing was wrong."

Walt sighed. "I see. You thought all your efforts in the last couple months were for nothing, and that
"You need to remember that prophecies can have multiple meanings," Walt reminded. "So what if one of the lines applied to your Roman persona more than your coming role? Who says that one line can only apply to one scenario? The world isn't so tightly structured that everything can fit nicely into prophecies. Prophecies are like movie trailers. Trailers don't give us the whole picture, and viewers shouldn't expect to know everything that's going to happen until they see the movie itself."

"But still," I muttered. "What if I'm wrong, Walt? Artemis opposed it. Chiron opposed it. Even I would oppose it if given an alternative, and that alternative has shown up-!"

"Do you really think everything you've done was for nothing?" I heard Lynetta interrupt me. "Seth, I can only imagine how terrifying it is to be surrounded by enemies on all sides, without a single ally on sight. But everything you've done in preparation for that—it isn't for nothing!" she exclaimed, catching me off guard. "You saved the Rayler siblings, destroyed enemy bases, brought vital information for the gods and Camp Half-Blood, and now, you've aided the Roman Camp. All while growing stronger both physically and mentally. You've faced Lycaon, Antiphates, and other notorious monsters on your own. You became a champion of Nemesis, gained new abilities, comprehend your fatal flaw, as well as gained new allies."

"So tell me, Seth," Lynetta said softly. She stood before me, her arms crossed. "Was everything I said 'nothing' to you? You've accomplished so much these last ten months with us, and you've also helped me and Mr. Forger in ways we didn't expect."

I didn't answer immediately, still overwhelmed by all the information Lynetta had thrown at me. Did I really do all that? Have I never looked back on what I've accomplished and just kept going? It seemed so much that I almost couldn't believe I've done all that.

"You're amazing, Seth Hunter," Lynetta said, giving a rare smile. "I won't stand by to let anyone, including yourself, say otherwise. As one of your mentors, I'm proud of you."

*I'm proud of you..."

"I...I don't know what to say," I said sheepishly, my cheeks burning. I never thought Lynetta, who I saw as my mentor and older sister figure, had regarded me so highly.

Walt grunted, "a simple 'thanks' would be sufficient. As well as giving me a new missile to replace the one I found missing in one of my M20 bazookas." I paled; I almost forgot about that.

"Walt, I could explain..." Lynetta lifted a hand to cut me off.

"Mr. Forger, you know you could always make another one," she said, rolling her eyes.

"They take a lot of time to make, you know," Walt muttered without malice. "But you're right, Lynetta. I just want to make sure that Seth Hunter knows never to use any of those without explicit permission from me. I've got enough trouble on my plate without the gods butting into my business."

"The gods?" I questioned. "Why would the gods care if Hunter used one of your bazookas?"

Walt and Lynetta shared a glance.

"It's complicated," Lynetta began, "but the simpler explanation has to do with the Mist and mortal involvement. The Mist, while powerful, doesn't always cover up everything. That's why there are..."
always some Clear-Sighted mortals. The Mist allows mortals see what they can believe—swords are
turned into hockey sticks, daggers into elongated pens. But guns are different. They're too modern to
be considered a mythical tradition. The mortals rely on guns so much that it's become a necessity, a
cultural norm. And because the Mist is functioned in a way to hide what's mythical and what's not..."

"...guns made with celestial bronze and imperial gold would cause problems," Walt finished.
"There's not enough of a division between the two worlds. The Mist would screw itself up, and
when mortals start making a fuss on the media of seeing monsters damaged by these bullets..."

"The gods would get involved," I said. "I always wondered why guns weren't used in Camp Half-
Blood or in Camp Jupiter. If it's such a security risk, then why do you guys use them? Why let me
use them in public?"

"It's fine if it's on a small scale," Walt explained. "Individual use of these guns is tolerable, but even
then, we have to make sure that this idea of using modern weaponry doesn't spread and get
popularized. The chances of mortals seeing our kind use them would increase, and nobody wants
that."

"What about the Titans and monsters? Wouldn't they rather use guns?"

Walt snorted. "Sure, if they don't mind getting exposed. We're not the only ones that benefit from the
Mist, Seth. Monsters use the Mist to blend in to ensure their safety and sneak up on ignorant
demigods." He turned to look at Lynetta. "Can you imagine, Lynetta? Mortals suddenly seeing a
gun-wielding dracaena strolling down a street? Monsters would have to worry about demigods and
mortals trying to kill them, and there are more mortals than there are monsters."

"Is the Mist really that unreliable?" I asked. "You make it sound like the Mist isn't there at all."

"What Mr. Forger said was extreme," Lynetta said. "But that would be the inevitable result. The Mist
may try to cover it up, but once mortals see even a flicker of the monsters' true form, and establish a
firm belief of monsters existing—then the Mist would lose its power, but you don't need to worry
about that," Lynetta reassured, "most cases, mortals won't believe anything even if it were placed in
front of them. That's the great thing about science and atheism."

"But there are always believers out there," Walt reminded. "That small chance is enough to keep
monsters from using mortal weaponry. Also, most monsters are either too inept or too much of a
bigot to use mortal technology."

"Still," I muttered. "Believers or no believers, I cannot imagine a monster scared of being seen by a
couple mortals. They're stronger than them. They can kill them easily."

"Yes, except the seed is already planted," Lynetta pointed out. "It'll take time, but as more and more
mortals start seeing the things we do...they would eventually become a force to be reckoned with, and
monsters would rather use their traditional methods of attack than risk their exposure."

"Enough," Walt said just as I was about to question them further. "As you're aware, Seth, you have a
free day today, but I insist that you take this time to get a lot of rest. Panic attacks aren't something to
joke about."

I looked down, slightly embarrassed. "Yes, Walt."

"Also, Lynetta and I have decided that you're ready to take the final test," Walt said solemnly. I
widened my eyes, I had expected it, but hearing that confirmation from Walt made me more excited.
"Once your free day is over, you will be given a month to get ready. Be sure to prepare for anything.
Everything you've learned, everything you've experienced—all of it will be put to the test."

I nodded firmly. I've been anticipating this.

Lynetta added, "I'll warn you that this last exam isn't like the ones you've taken. Every student, including me, has taken this exam. I'm sure you've heard how Mr. Forger had a less than forty percent success rate?"

"I did," I answered.

"The main reason why the other sixty percent failed, was because of this last exam."

For a moment, I forgot how to breathe. My mouth was agape, and my mind was taken over by shock. I was left standing there, completely stunned. I knew the last exam was bound to be challenging, but for it to be main reason why so many previous students failed...there must be something they weren't telling me.

"You said that every student took this exam," I repeated. Lynetta nodded. "Is this exam similar to Lupa's initiation? Like how she alters the test to suit each person's capabilities?" Lynetta only smiled, and I saw Walt give a knowing smirk.

"Maybe," Walt answered. "Maybe not. You'll just have to wait and find out."

"Yes," Lynetta agreed, "after all, I wasn't given much information about the final either. If I can do it, then I'm sure you can too."

"What about Hunter?" I asked. Walt shrugged.

"You can switch back and forth right? Do that. Or don't. It won't matter."

"We're expecting great things from you," Lynetta added. "Don't disappoint us."

I swallowed uncomfortably as I saw both of my teachers look at me expectantly.

I wished my teachers weren't such trolls, but that was also one of the reasons why I respected them so much.

-o-

Chapter End Notes

*Although Hunter displays common traits, he is not a psychopath or sociopath. Despite what Seth thinks, Hunter is capable of compassion and kindness for others; he just doesn't know how to show it. In the previous chapter, he took care of Jacob without thinking about what he could gain for himself, and he also took care of Michael, despite him being Venus' son. Hunter is also capable of remorse, in which both psychopaths and sociopaths lack.

**Panic attacks can come out of nowhere, and they are commonly caused by fear and anxiety. If you aren't aware of it already, Seth has gone through a lot, often without someone there with him. While it's true that Seth has been afraid and anxious in the past, he had managed to keep all that bottled up and Lappy's unintended trigger had set it off.
Seth's mind was also in a more fragile state after his conflict with Hunter.

A/N: This chapter contains one of the longest fight scenes I've written thus far. If any of you are writers, then you'll understand the challenges of writing action sequences readers can visualize. If you decide to review, please tell me what you think of the fight in this chapter. Was it easy or hard for you to picture? Constructive criticism is always welcome.

Please leave your thoughts, predictions, and opinions in your review! Thanks for reading!
Shaded Trials

Chapter Summary

Seth starts the final exam, and Hunter is off doing who knows what.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Dark Content. (If you couldn't tell already, this story is getting progressively darker. There will still be some light moments now and then, but I may not put this warning up anymore once everyone learns to expect it).

Enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When I entered my room, I saw the Spear of Diomedes on my bed.  

The sight of that gaudy weapon made me irritated. Clenching my teeth, I stalked my way over to the bed, sliding my archery equipment off my back roughly, and picked it up. I inspected the bronze spear with narrowed eyes before opening my closet door and shoving the thing inside. Hunter claimed that he killed Octavian to protect our secrets, but I knew better. The real reason he got rid of the augur was now stuck in my closet, and the mere thought of Hunter placing more value on an object over a life sickened me.

I knew Octavian wasn’t the best person around. I knew many people disliked him, and if I met him instead of as my other self, I wouldn’t dislike him any less. He was the kind of person I despised: a lying, manipulative bastard with no qualms against blackmail, and using violence and corruption to meet his selfish ambitions. Ideally, he was better off gone, but that didn’t mean I wanted Hunter to have a hand in that outcome. Too many problems came along with causing someone’s death, and now Hunter had burdened us with not one, but two of those packages. For all his talk of prevention and self-preservation, Hunter sure knew how to create more problems for us.

He’s really like a child, I thought irascibly. Getting tunnel vision the moment he sees something he wants—what a brat. And I’m the one that needs to pick up after him.

I should have stood my ground. I should never have let his tempting words get to me. If I had stopped Hunter from his conquest of getting that spear, we would never have encountered Octavian, and the augur would still be alive at Camp Jupiter. That would have been one life off our list.

Why are you angry? Hunter had asked. He had looked genuinely confused. Each kill is my own, my decision. It shouldn't affect your conscious.

Why, huh? I thought morbidly. Lappy had warned me about getting lost to his whims, and yet I had more or less went along for the ride. I was still angry at Hunter, but most of all, I was disappointed in myself for not doing what was right. In the end, everything Hunter did was equally my fault. I made Hunter for who he is, and whatever he did was ultimately my responsibility.
I shook these thoughts out of my head. I had more important matters to deal with besides the Roman prick. I'd worry about him later.

I lied down on my bed, my shoes off, and another torn jacket disposed of. By now, my injuries from my first (and hopefully last) car accident were non-existent, like the incident never occurred in the first place. I didn't know whether to feel grateful or disturbed by how my body easily erased these events while my mind struggled to let go. When I closed my eyes, I could vividly picture being in that car still—glass shattering, metal turning inside out, piercing screams...my only thought as Hunter was whether or not I got out alive.

I opened my eyes again. The dim lighting and quiet atmosphere calmed my beating heart, and the solitude got me to truly relax. My expression softened, my shoulders slumped, and my body felt the exhaustion. My sighs felt so haggard that I thought I was sweating, only to realize my forehead remained cool. After a prolonged moment of doing nothing, I began planning out what I'd need to do in the next month. Walt and Lynetta had refused to specify what the final exam was about. Lynetta said it was unlike any test I've done before, and the reason why so many previous students failed. The exam was used for every student, but I doubt it was a one-test-fit-all kind of thing. It had to be similar to what Lupa did, but something less practical.

I sat up and went to my desk, which was cluttered with scattered gun parts and bullets. I hastily cleared them out, and also placed Nightwalker and Dark Hacker gently on a soft velvety cloth (Lynetta had gotten one for me) in one of the drawers, reminding myself to polish them again later. I took out a piece of paper, a pencil in my right hand, and began to draw out my training schedule:

**Monday:** Swordsmanship, Hand to hand combat, Aura Detection, Music Lessons

**Tuesday:** Dual Wielding, Archery, Marksmanship, Music Lessons

**Wednesday:** Swordsmanship, Gymnastics, Jogging, Music Lessons

**Thursday:** Lappy, Marksmanship, Combat, Music lessons

**Friday:** Spear and Lance training, Swordsmanship, Acrobatics, Music Lessons

**Saturday:** Celestial Silver Manipulation

**Sunday:** Break. Review course material, plans, and music pieces.

I looked down at my schedule, satisfied. I was willing to bet big money that the last exam would test my fatal flaw, so I made sure to practice piano every day to help me better control my emotions. My swordsmanship still needed improvement, so I wrote that down for three days of the week. I also needed to work on strengthening my punches and upper body, and not always depend on my kicks. For areas I was more comfortable in, like archery and dual wielding, I'd focus on for one day a week at most. I also put down Lappy to focus on strengthening my familiar bond with him, in case I was allowed outside help. My control over celestial silver would take up all of Saturday. I still wasn't certain of my limits in that area, and I needed to gauge how much manipulating I could do before my body replenished of energy. Sunday would be my time to plan, renew my energy, and exercise my brain instead of my body. I also needed to make sure I eat healthy and get plenty of rest.

Looking it over again, I realized that I didn't really include Hunter in anything. Technically, he could follow my schedule, but we'd have to organize our turns accordingly. It was in our best interest to work together and push aside our differences, but I was still too angry to do that. Until the smug prick decided to give me my much deserved apology, I wasn't going to break our Cold War. Of course, I would give Hunter his time to train too, angry or not, but I'd only give it to him if he
I spent a couple minutes to rest up before I headed back downstairs and into the kitchen, reminded that I needed to repay Mercury for allowing Hunter his short visit. For the rest of the day, I was washing and cutting up produce, mixing ingredients, and checking the oven and stove as the food boiled and cooked. I also prepared tonight's dinner, eating only a few hasty bites before I rushed back to check on the pot pies and cornbread. I lifted a hand to wipe my sweaty brow as I rolled out a table of cakes, pastries, lasagna, pasta, chicken broth, pot pies, and roast beef, my most recently added dish. Lynetta had already set up the pyre, and after I gave a silent prayer to Mercury, the food was set ablaze. I watched the flames flicker and eat away my hard work in morbid silence. Suddenly, the flames burst out loudly, and somehow, I knew it was a sign that Mercury was pleased. This was only half the portion I promised the god of thieves, but he'd get the rest of his due by tomorrow afternoon.

I was weary to the bone when I finally climbed into bed. It's been a while since I cooked that much, and all the standing, cutting, and running around was as tiring as jogging a marathon. I almost asked Hunter to take over because he made the deal with Mercury, yet it was me doing all the work. However, if I gave him back the control so soon after our dispute, it would seem like an act of surrender on my part. So I didn't ask. Even so, I could tell my culinary skills have improved, and given the available ingredients, I could prepare meals much faster than before.

Time went by quickly. I carried out my schedule as planned, and while I slept, I didn't have any encounters with Hunter. I avoided the main room, and I didn't bother to look for Hunter when he didn't show. A week later, I decided to take a peek, and noticed that no one was there. I had sat down in my usual seat by the fire, and stayed up reading my imagined copy of Hamlet until my eyelids felt too heavy. Hunter didn't show up.

I went back in the following day, and again, the room was empty. This continued on for the next few weeks. I also didn't see or hear Hunter throughout my training. During my latest fight with Lynetta, it was the closest I've ever came to defeating her. We were doing a sword match, and I was matching Lynetta blow for blow. I had only one sword in my hands instead of two, and an hour in, we were both wearing down. I sidestepped a fatal hit before twisting around, dodging her sword thrust while holding my sword close to her neck.

I was shocked by my sudden victory. A split second later, Lynetta reacted—twisting my sword arm with her free hand and flipping my whole body down onto the ground. Despite the amount of pain now registering in my brain, I remained in disbelief.

I had beaten Lynetta.

"Don't get cocky," Lynetta said, though I sensed some teasing in her tone. "You're still a couple years too early to beat me."

"I had you," I insisted, "if this was a real battle-!"

"Who's the one lying on the ground again?"

That got me to shut up, but I was still proud of my short-lived victory. In that moment of pride, I even announced it to Hunter, who didn't respond back. The silence lasted for so long that I gave up waiting for any answer. The last time I heard from Hunter, we had just gotten back from California, when Walt announced we were ready for the final.

Now, the final was starting tomorrow, and Hunter still didn't appear. At first, I thought Hunter was throwing one of those silent tantrums kids used when they didn't get their way. Or perhaps he was...
testing my resolve- waiting to see how long it took to get me to crack. Whatever the reason, I was starting to worry. I really needed Hunter to do training. Despite what Walt said, Hunter might be essential in passing our test tomorrow. After all, he's also Walt's student, and as a mentor, it's only right if Walt also considered Hunter and not just me.

So far, Hunter has done nothing. No training, no practicing, and no communication whatsoever. Did he not care? Was he hoping that I would be enough to pass the final? Or was Hunter really that petty about our fight? Now that I thought about it, I did hurt him real bad last time. I landed more serious hits on him than he did me, and the reminder made me wince.

Hunter, I called, somewhat giving in. Tomorrow's the final, and there's only half a day left. Would you like some time? I've already gotten more than my fair share and...If you want, you can have the whole afternoon to yourself. I promise I won't bother you. What do you say?

Silence.

I sighed heavily, placing a hand to my forehead, my eyes closing briefly. If you're not answering, then I'll take that as a no.

More silence. I gritted my teeth at his blatant (and rude) dismissal. Hunter was seriously testing my patience, but his answer (or lack of one) confirmed how the Roman could care less about training or the upcoming exam. If he was going to let our fight get in the way of his training, then that's all on him. I offered, and he didn't take it. I wasn't so desperate that I'd go looking for him and drag him out.

Next morning, I was geared up and ready to go. I walked down the spiral staircase, looking back at it for one lingering moment before opening the door leading down to the Training Room, where Walt and Lynetta were both waiting. I walked down the stairs in tentative silence, trying to recollect and calm my beating heart. I didn't realize I was clenching my hands until I reached for my dagger, placed behind my waist, for reassurance. An inaudible breath escaped my lips when I looked up to see my two mentors standing side by side, standing before the double doors that contained my test.

Walt spoke first. "Seth Hunter. Do you know why you are here?"

"To take the final," I answered.

He nodded. "Yes, and do you recall why you came to train with us?"

"To survive," I said, "I want to be there for what happens after the coming war, and live a life I always wanted to live."

"And has our training allowed you to see that goal more clearly?" Lynetta asked.

Flashbacks of all the missions and training sessions raced across my mind. I could still feel the amount of sweat and pain I had put in before, during, and after each fight with Lynetta, the automatons, monsters, mortals, and divine opponents I faced. The hours I put in to practice music. I could still feel the immeasurable exhaustion after manipulating celestial silver for brief periods at a time. At the same time, I remembered how proud I was when I finally mastered swordsmanship, as well as when I defeated my long-awaited opponent, Antiphates.

Other noteworthy events occurred too. I was glad I had the opportunity to meet Jason, his team, and the Fifth Cohort, even if I had met them as Hunter, and not as 'me'. I was glad I got to spend more time with Lucy, and be able to speak with Will, Annabeth, Percy, Katie, and Grover on good terms. I was glad I resolved my conflict with Tyson, as well as with the Hunters, Thalia especially, since
she knew of my predicament. As for Artemis...

Suddenly, I felt my chest tighten in...Anxiety? Confusion? For the first time, I couldn't identify what I was feeling. It was more like an amalgam of different emotions that have convoluted together to make me feel what I was feeling. It was strange. It wasn't hate, and the feeling didn't have that sense of emptiness and neutrality like before...

I let out a resigned sigh, and decided to not dwell on that stressful topic any further. I had more important matters that required all my attention right now.

Did my training help me take one step closer to achieving my goal? The answer was evident.

"I will never forget my time here," I said sincerely. I stepped back to dip my head down in respect. "I'll never regret all the memories I've made, and I am honored to have the opportunity to train under the two of you. Every skill I've learned here will be put to good use, I promise."

"We'll see about that," Lynetta murmured, "but for what it's worth, I enjoyed having you as a student too."

They moved aside simultaneously. With one hand on the door handle, and his back facing me, Walt gave me one last piece of advice.

"This exam isn't of my making," Walt admitted quietly, "whatever you face in there, just know that anything is possible, but not impossible to overcome."

I was too stunned by his first admission to say anything. Walt didn't create this exam? Then who did?

He continued, but this time he spoke formally in Latin. "May the Fates grant you fortune upon your endeavors."

The doors opened, and a bright light engulfed my vision as my mind turned blank.

-o-

It was dark, and the air was icy cold.

I was lying face down on the ground, my bare hands recognizing laminated tiles. I quickly sat up, clenching my arms against my hoodie to keep warmth from escaping. When I breathed, I could see mist forming in front of me, but nothing beyond that. It was completely dark, and for someone who had infrared vision, it was an odd situation. I wasn't used to seeing nothing with both eyes open, like I was blind.

Just as soon as I took in my surroundings, my hearing picked up the sound of rushing water. I couldn't tell where it was coming from, but I knew the output was big. Soon, my feet was submerged in water, and then my legs, and then my waist. I struggled to wade through, but I had no direction. I couldn't even tell how high the ceiling was, and when I started floating up, I lost track of the ground too. I tried to relax and think a way out, but I was panicking too much to think coherently. I couldn't see or feel any way out, and the freezing water was rising higher and higher.

I kept swimming, trying to keep my head above water, but everything I had on me- my garments, daggers, bow and quiver- threatened to weigh me under. I forced my body to keep moving well past my exertion peak. There had to be a way out, I thought. If there was a source for the water to come in, then there had to be a way out.

The water reached my chin.
I panted, letting out a breath before closing it when water almost seeped in. I could taste the cold tasteless liquid that slid beside my gums. I kept thinking about what Walt had said, how anything could be possible. Then, I was reminded of Hermes' warning months earlier, that some of Walt's students were forced to give up or even died during the exams and missions.

*I won't become one of them.*

My head hit something hard—the ceiling. I was trapped. I tilted my face up, kicking hard as my arms moved about while my fingers touched solid stone.

*No, no, no,* my mind panicked. *It can't be! This can't be it! I won't die here! I WON'T DIE!

My head went under.

My eyes opened, and I saw nothing but darkness. There was nothing I could see. Nothing to grab onto. I swam around, trying to find something—but I was running out of air. My lungs felt like they were about to explode. At that moment, my body felt haggard, raw. I haven't felt this vulnerable against nature since the time I took a forced sky-dive into the Mississippi River. I squeezed my eyes shut, despair starting to creep in.

A light shined through my eyelids.

I blinked wearily, and for some illogical reason, I saw my feet standing on metal plating. There was glass all around me, the space roughly three feet wide on all sides. I was wearing different clothes—stark white, like what patients wore in hospitals, and I had on no shoes. Worse, my back was bare, and the daggers I had around my waist were gone.

How in the world did I get in here?

While I tried to make sense of this fallacy, a loud voice echoed through a mic above me:

"*Subject 001 has awoken, and is showing signs of distress.*"

*Wait,* what?!

I finally looked up, and I saw figures in white cloaks surrounded all sides of my...my glass cell. There were two men and one woman, and I didn't recognize any of them. The woman had a clipboard, while one man stood beside some large contraption thingy. The last man was standing before me. His face was blurred; I couldn't make out any distinct traits.

"*How are you feeling today, Subject 001?*" he said, and without for my reply, he continued, "you were quite rowdy yesterday, not taking your meds or your injections. We had to sedate you and put you to sleep. Do you remember any of that, Subject 001?"

*Who are you?! What am I doing here?! You got the wrong person!* My mind wanted to scream, but when I opened my mouth, no sound came out. I tried to relax the best I could, and then talk—but again, no sound was heard. It couldn't be my hearing—I heard the man talk just fine. Then why...

My hand reached my throat, and I felt *fresh stitches*...

My eyes widened, a painful burn started to emerge, settling around my neck. My head grew so faint, that my knees weakened, causing me to collapse on the ground in shock.

The man before me stared on impassively. "*I see you noticed the effects of your latest surgery. The higher ups believed that a subject like you has no need for a voice. Voices belong to those who*..."
deserve to have their opinions heard, and you have lost that right. The team agreed with their input, for we believe it will make you more compliant."

You assholes! I raged, anger taking over as I started pounding my fists against the glass. What have I ever done to you?! Why are doing this to me?!

"Subject 001 appears to be in a state of confusion," the man muttered, addressing more to his associate than to me. "We warned you many times before, but you didn't listen. Your...misbehavior has warranted punishment."

What misbehavior?! My mind cried out.

"Be sure to behave, Subject 001," the man reprimanded. "We have guests coming in to see you, and our boss is also coming in for a visit. You should be honored."

"Sir, our guests have arrived, and are requesting access," the woman announced.

The man smiled, blatantly ignoring the glare I was throwing him. "Speak of the devil! Bring them in."

I heard doors sliding open, and footsteps pouring in. When the guests came into view, my heart stopped:

Annabeth Chase, Percy Jackson, Grover Underwood, Will Solace, Thalia Grace, and Katie Gardner were in the room. I felt my body tremble, feeling immensely relieved to see people I know, people that would get me out, help me escape out of this hellhole.

That relief died when Annabeth spoke, "so this is the subject you've been working on?"

Katie wrinkled her nose. "It looks so dirty and gross."

"Doesn't look like much," I heard Percy mutter beside her. Grover grunted in agreement. "He looks so weak and malnourished." He almost looked concerned, and turned to the man. "You guys are feeding him properly, right?"

"Don't tell me you're treating this thing like it's one of us," Thalia cut in coldly. "It may look like it, but it's just an experiment."

"It's not that," Percy dismissed, "I'm just worried it won't function right, you know?"

They didn't recognize me.

The cell suddenly felt claustrophobic, like the glass was slowly closing in on me on all sides. I wanted to place my hands over my sharp ears, which heard every hurtful thing they said despite having no mic turned on. I felt like a child again, wanting to curl into a tight ball under thick covers, pretending the fabric was my makeshift shield. This place couldn't be reality; my mind must be playing cruel tricks on me, but the ache that was growing in my chest felt real enough.

"A good point, Mr. Jackson," the man said, "we are feeding Subject 001 the dosage it needs daily, but like Ms. Grace said, it's just an experiment. It shouldn't warrant any concern or pity."

This place is not real. This place is NOT REAL...

"So what progress have you guys made?" Will asked. "That's what we're here for, after all."

"Of course, Mr. Solace," the man said kindly. "Yesterday, our data showed an increased spike in
physical and regenerative abilities. We believe that if we continue to do what we have been doing, Subject 001 shall be ready for marketing in the next three months."

"Marketing?!"

"Marketing?" Annabeth voiced my question. "How do you propose you do that?"

"Cloning," the man said simply. "That's the beauty of it all, Ms. Chase! Subject 001, if it happens to not meet our criteria, we can simply make another. Easily replaceable."

I choked, the stitches sown around my neck made the once normal gesture painful. I've heard a lot of insults and other inconsiderable things said about me over the years – Freak, bastard, second-rate, doppelganger, it—but the one word that trumped all others was replaceable. I absolutely hate that word more than anything, more because it held a neutral connotation and undeniable truth. My hand was around my tampered neck, my head spinning, and my vision threatened to black out. This was all a bad dream, I reasoned once more. Shock therapy, right? This wasn't happening-

A cell phone sounded, and the man reached down to answer it. "Right now? Oh, of course, ma'am! Anytime is suitable!" He closed the phone, and smiled at the audience. "Our boss is also paying us a visit today, the one who made this research possible!"

My heart fell when I saw how ecstatic they were. Annabeth was energetic, shooting off more questions while Will and Percy appeared surprised. Grover was staring at me curiously, and when I motioned for him to help me somehow, he became crept out, and turned his gaze sharply. The rejection rung deep, and the suffocation building inside me was worse than drowning.

When the boss finally showed, my face felt like it was slapped numerous times. I should have known how this alternate universe would screw me over.

"Ms. Artemis," the man said happily, guiding my creator towards the group. "These are our guests! They're very interested in what we do, and would likely invest in our project."

"Pleased to meet you all," the Huntress greeted curtly. She was dressed like a high-class CEO, donning a pristine white blazer and pencil skirt, a silvery blouse tucked in. Her auburn hair was wrapped in a high bun, and she wore stiletto heels. Her face was immaculate, and it shown with a powerful aura befitting one used to authority and power. Her silver eyes browsed through the group, and she gave a smile that could almost be seen as charming.

As charming as a snake before it strikes, I thought warily. Even in a nightmare, Artemis was always a force to deal with.

I saw Grover swoon at Artemis before Annabeth asked, "Ms. Artemis, you're the one who started this project?"

"That's correct," she answered, before she turned her attention to me. "Subject 001 is my creation, but I also see him as my child, of a sort. His DNA matches mine, making him belong only to me. Thanks to the work of our scientists, Subject 001 has become gifted, and thus, given good stock value that's worthy of any investment."

The edges of her lips turned up as she walked closer. I forced myself to look her in the eye, trying to find any sort of sympathy in this cold-hearted woman. Her eyes only reflected back my own. The Artemis in this reality displayed everything I once hated about her- apathy, arrogance, disdain, and for this version, a tinge of maniacal obsession. I could see how much she 'valued' me—I was her future profit, stuck in this nightmarish test tube. She eyed me like how a rat sees cheese.
Her gaze lingered, and I felt a strong urge to lash out, only to be reminded that I was still contained. I pressed my palms to the glass, feeling it. The white sleeves slid down a little, revealing my abnormally thin wrists. I swallowed uncomfortably—apparently this body not only lacked a voice, but any physical strength I gained from training. My current body form was at its weakest, and briefly, I doubted if I could ever break free, given these poor conditions.

*Stop thinking like that! My mind rebuked. This place isn't real. It's fooling you, Seth. Don't fall for its illusions!*

*That's right...* I thought slowly. I wasn't really here. How did I forget that so quickly? Was this place like the Lotus Casino, but far more twisted? I was undergoing Walt's final exam, and this was it. Artemis wasn't a CEO with a sick fetish for cloning profits. Annabeth, Percy, Thalia, Grover, Will, and Katie were my friends, and would *never* be interested in investing into a sick project like this. They would *not* stand by and see me caged like a lab rat. They would *not* make jeering comments and scorn me like I was mud on their shoes. I was *not* an anorexic and mute experiment.

I...I was much *more* than that.

Artemis leered at me, pressing her hand against where my palm laid, like she was trying out some silent communication technique. I wanted her away from me, and I told her so.

"*Get away from me, fake!*" I seethed, my voice loud and clear. Somehow, I could sense this world's illusion faltering. The fake Artemis took a step back, shock registering in that pristine face of hers, and that was a sight to behold. "I do not belong in this sick fantasy, and you will *not* keep me here!"

Renewed strength coursed through my arms as I punched through the glass, shattering it to pieces. I stepped down from my old prison, and when I looked around, I noticed that my 'friends' were gone. The scientists have also vanished, and the scene before me turned pixelated before fading to black—like how those old version games transitioned from one scene to the next.

I looked down, and saw my usual attire on my body again. My back felt heavier with my bow and quiver, and my valuable daggers were tied around my waist once more. I lifted a hand to my neck, and was relieved to know that I no longer had any stitches. I even tried talking, and I chuckled at the sound of my voice.

"Am I glad to hear myself talk again," I muttered aloud. If there was anything I gained from that hellish experience, then it was to never take my voice for granted, ever. I scanned my new surroundings quickly, noticing how the air felt cool and fresh, like I was outside. I squinted my eyes when I saw a bright light appearing, and when my silver eyes finally adjusted to the change, I realized I was standing in what looked to be an arena, surrounded by ruined columns and destroyed statues. Another test has begun.

Staying cautious, I eyed each obstacle I passed carefully. When I finally got out of that makeshift maze and into a clear space, I finally noticed the circular stands, and the familiar Roman architecture...

I was inside the Grand Coliseum.

Before I could fully digest what was going on, my sharp ears heard the notching of a bow. My body turned by instinct—sidestepping three arrows that pierced the ground before me. I prepared my own bow and arrows quickly, and ran back inside the ancient maze of rubble. I had my back against a marred statue, my gloved hands tightening around my weapon, ready to fight this enemy archer.

I heard footsteps clashing against stone, and I thought I saw a glimpse of a dark figure scurrying
about the stadium. I notched my three arrows, turned my whole body forward and aimed...

...only to see my hooded enemy do the same thing. Our eyes met (or so I believed, since I couldn't make out his face), and I fired first, my opponent doing the same a second later. My eyes saw the arrow points meet point blank, all his arrows cancelling out my attacks, leaving behind splintered sticks on the ground. I was in disbelief—the odds of my arrows being thwarted in mid-air were near impossible! To see all three arrows ending up as useless twigs...it was like one of those dramatic scenes out of Robin Hood.

I gritted my teeth, my pride stung as I glared at the hooded enemy standing in front of the first row of benched seats. So his archery wasn't terrible, whatever. If I could handle drowning and being trapped in a glass prison with a mad scientist version of Artemis, then I could beat this more tangible assailant. It was what I trained for after all. From here, I could almost see him give a shaded smile before he abandoned his high vantage point and leaped down into the sanded arena. His dark hood remained up, obscuring his identity. Then, he lowered his bow, leaving himself completely open.

He was issuing a challenge, and did I accept it?

I notched my weapon and ran out, answering his request full on.

My enemy reacted too, drawing his bow faster than I thought possible while he narrowly dodged the arrows I aimed at his head. He drew back while I tried to close the distance, my feet kicking against sand as I rapidly gained on him, shooting round after round. My opponent, however, managed to deflect my arrows by dodging or knocking them aside with his bow, which, I'd admit grudgingly, was quite a feat.

This is no good, I thought. After years of practicing archery, I knew intuitively that my enemy's skill with the bow rivaled or even surpassed mine. He has demonstrated techniques that equated years of training for the ambitious mortal or months of practice for someone of my caliber. I've only known few who could achieve what this person has shown me (some of them being gods) and briefly, I wondered who I was facing.

"Who are you?" I asked my hooded enemy, taking a moment to catch my breath. I still had my bow drawn. "Which of my enemies are you?"

If I was to judge this scenario while using my earlier 'tests' as reference, then logically, this opponent must be some product of my inner fears. So far, the match had been purely physical. Nothing I've never seen before, and this unambiguous test made me uneasy. There had to be a catch, and I was willing to bet that catch was linked to my opponent's identity.

"You know me well," my enemy finally whispered, "and I know you, Seth Hunter."

My body stiffened, like I was caught in an icy breeze. My heart rate got faster, and my throat suddenly felt parched as I took a step back. I knew that voice. I recognized it instantly, but there was no way! He couldn't be here. It wasn't possible because...

He lowered his weapon, a gold cypress bow, and with a hand, he pulled down his hood, and tossed the dark robe aside, revealing a bright Camp Half-Blood T-shirt.

...because he was supposed to be dead.

My opponent was Lee Fletcher.

No! My mind protested. He's dead! His body's in a casket! It's NOT him-!
But he was there. The person before me resembled Lee exactly as I remembered him. From his windswept blond hair, lithe figure, that worn sword strap crisscrossing over his quiver of arrows on his back, and that gold bow carved from several days of work and patience...it was all Lee Fletcher. He had a set of six beads around his neck, the orange sleeves rolled up to expose defined muscle. He also wore the same elbow length archery gloves he had recommended me to wear.

In my moment of shock, however, I had unintentionally lowered my defenses. I didn't even notice how Lee still had his weapon up, or when he fired. All I did know, or felt, was the tearing sensation of an arrow puncturing my left arm socket. I screamed, my left hand forced to let go of my bow as I dropped to my knees. For a long moment, my mind was blinded by pain. My left arm felt like dead weight.

"Hey Seth," he said cheerfully with a wave, like he didn't just render one of my arms useless. "What a reunion, huh?" He ran a hand through his hair, unmarred by blood and his head still intact; a familiar yet chilling smile on his face. His blue eyes, which once displayed so much warmth, was terrifying apathetic. "How does it feel to be on your knees, cousin?"

"Y-you're dead," I rasped. I felt my lower lip quiver before I shut my mouth and forced a swallow. My hand finally had a firm grasp around the arrow. "What...how are you here?"

Lee shrugged, lowering his weapon momentarily. "How should I know? You are the one that brought me here, and now that you have..." He quickly snapped his bow into position, setting numerous arrows so quickly his gloved hands were almost a blur. I had admire that technique so much back then.

He gave a boyish grin. "You will not leave here alive."

I gasped as my hand finally yanked out the arrow, now partially tainted with my blood. Now, I understood why this exam was unlike all the ones I've taken, the ones Walt or Lynetta or the gods have prepared. Why this exam was the one that will test me to my full limits, and become the ultimate challenge. For it was I that prepared this final exam.

For who knew my fears and weaknesses better than me?

Placing a bloodstained hand to my knee, I forced myself up. Unfortunately, I could still feel my knees quivering. Even though I knew this Lee wasn't the real Lee, its presence still brought about emotions I thought I had recovered from. "Why are you trying to kill me, Lee?"

"Why?" Lee murmured. "It's simple—you have stolen from me, and I'm here to take it back with your life."

I was incredulous. "I didn't take anything from you!"

Suddenly, I heard the snap of the drawstring, and I felt at least five arrows breeze past. If I hadn't turned my heel and move, my head would not be where it should be. I looked back, and was shocked to see Lee's menacing glare.

"Liar!" he spat vehemently. "You took everything from me! If I had known that you'd let me die and take away everything I've worked so hard for, I would never have welcomed you! Trusted you!"

YOU LET ME DIE!

Each accusation was like a stab to the heart, twisting and puncturing it beyond repair. Adding on to the guilt I already felt about Lee's untimely death, my body was on the verge of collapse. I clenched my teeth and tightened a fist over my shirt, right over my rapidly beating heart. Despite how much
control I've gained, the emotional turmoil I felt was rising higher, and I didn't know if I could control it.

This is a test, I reminded, squeezing my pricked eyes shut. It's just a test...

But it didn't make it less painful.

"I didn't know what could have happened," I tried justifying to Lee—or rather, the shade of all the guilt and regret I felt concerning its chosen resemblance. "I know I could have come back sooner, but I had other obligations!"

"I'm sure you do," Lee's shade agreed easily. He started to circle around me, keeping a measurable distance between us. He kept his stark eyes on me, his steps quiet and predatory. "They must be so important, that you didn't bother to say a simple good-bye to me and everyone you left behind at Camp." He placed his free hand to his forehead, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "You had the option to come back. You could have saved me if you had come back sooner. Do I mean so little to you, Seth?"

"No!" I said immediately. "Lee, you know I see you as my older brother. You and Will treated me like family when I had no one else. You helped me so much more than I could repay you, and if it weren't for you, I'd never be the archer I am today. I've always looked up to you!"

While I admired Thalia for her leadership and loyalty, Lee Fletcher was also another role model I wanted to imitate. He was kind, cheerful, and he was there whenever I was feeling down. He was patient, and secretly, I even thought he was really cool. He was the counselor of Cabin 7, the Camp's ace archer. A great leader, friend, and ally. Lee was all that, yet he didn't mind spending time with the new castaway stuck in Cabin 11. It was unheard of, I had thought, that such a popular, likeable guy would want to get to know me.

Being the distrustful kind of guy I was back then, I doubted his good intentions, thinking it was because he thought I was a potential half-brother. However, when it became obvious that I wasn't, he and Will never ceased their interaction with me. Eventually, his good nature came through, and when I finally revealed what I was to Lee and Will, they didn't judge. They didn't get angry that I've kept it from them. Instead, what I got was their acceptance, and to this day, I couldn't recall another time I've come so close to crying. I had expected the worst, and when I received something so...so good—I felt like the happiest person on earth.

Lee's face was impassive as he took in my truthful answer. "You looked up to me? You...wanted to be... like me?"

I nodded urgently, hoping that this Lee would understand, if only to give me closure at last. "Of course, Lee. You were amazing. Everyone knew that."

"So I was," he murmured, his face downcast, "but now it's all yours, isn't it?"

The atmosphere around us grew dark, a strong wind surged by us, turning the scene into nothingness. The Coliseum vanished, replaced only by cloudy skies and barren hills that seemed to stretch on endlessly.

"Acting like a 'big brother' to my siblings, becoming Camp Half-Blood's best archer, and then becoming a Cabin counselor?" Lee snarled, his voice growing louder by the second. "You want to be like me?!" He scoffed with derision. "No, you wanted to REPLACE ME!"

He loaded his bow, and our battle started once more, only with much more at stake. My eyes trained
on his arrows, and I raised my daggers to slash them mid-air, my left arm still dragging. Lee was relentless, his longer legs giving him the edge in speed as he shot wave after wave while he dashed across the open space. I could only stumble and crouch to narrowly dodge his fatal shots.

There was nothing I could use as a barrier. We were fighting on a clear, wide battleground. There was nothing to obscure my presence, nothing I could use as alternate weapons or to elevate my position. It was an unsuitable environment for my abilities, placing me at the worst disadvantage.

I dodged another set of arrows, one of them nicking my neck and another cutting my exposed shoulder. The arrows just kept coming and coming, never running out; each of them fueled by anger, hate, and betrayal. Lee's baleful gaze never once turned away from me, as if he wanted to make sure he caught the precise moment his shot landed. I had to close the distance—Lee specialized in long-ranged attacks, and seeing how he once held the title of best archer of Camp Half-Blood, it was only a matter of time before another of his arrows landed in the desired spot. I had to turn the tables before my energy was sapped away by growing exhaustion.

I got back up, meeting Lee Fletcher head on as he fired continuously. I willed my daggers to vanish—a bow appearing in my hands. I quickly notched my silver arrows and fired. Lee responded in kind. Our attacks clashed—arrow splintering arrow—creating a flurry of silver and gold sparks. With a great leap, my body angled itself strategically off the ground, knives materializing, and I swung down with all my might. Lee clenched his teeth, bringing his bow up to maneuver against my blades.

"Nice tricks," Lee muttered. He lurched forward, pushing me back slightly before he kicked my stomach. My back hit the ground, and as I dizzily got up, Lee was behind me and he wrung his bow over my neck, the grip handle digging against my jugular. I lifted my freed hands to tug the bow away, but Lee's hold only tightened, choking me.

"Do you know what my dream was?" Lee whispered by my ear. "I wanted to travel the world, open up my own archery school. I had planned to finish college, study abroad, have a family, and afford one of those fancy cars my father drives around. I wanted to see my little half-siblings grow up, be there for them as they enter adulthood."

I kept struggling. I knew I shouldn't be listening to what this Lee was saying. Logically, this fake version of Lee was trying to throw me off, saying things Lee would say to distract me. I knew better than to listen to this shade. However, no matter how sound my reasoning was, my heart still felt its words of poison leaking into its chambers.

It only got worse when his voice broke, like he was on the verge of crying. "I...I wanted to see Will become a doctor, and Austin become a musician. I wanted to cheer for Kayla at her recitals because I planned on attending every one of them. I wanted to meet my significant other, and know what it's like to be loved."

Then, I felt his hand tug at my hair, forcing me to face him. Even though I expected it, I was still startled to see red pricked eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks. His face so contorted by hate and anguish that it resembled a demon. A malicious ghost.

"I hate you," Lee said vehemently, "you took my life from me, and so I'll take yours!"

His poisonous words still echoed in my mind, but the moment his hold on his bow loosened slightly, I clashed my forehead against his, knocking Lee out momentarily. Lee hated me. He hated me so much that he even came back from the grave to take me down with him. In a way, his words contained an inkling of truth—I acted like his replacement. I watched over the rest of Apollo Cabin because I felt responsible for them, and did so for Lee's sake. Even so...
I held my daggers at the ready as Lee recovered from my earlier attack, his blue eyes flashing murderously. "You have every reason to hate me, Lee. I didn't save you when I could have. I didn't say good-bye to you when I left, and when I was gone...I didn't even think of you until Will called and informed me of your death."

"So you admit it," Lee replied, "you didn't care about me-!"

"I'm not admitting that!" I interrupted. "The only reason why I didn't think of you, or say good-bye to anyone, was because I expected to see you all again. I've always held you at the highest regard, Lee. You were strong and reliable, and you had many friends by your side. I never thought, or even imagined, that you would falter and die the way you did, and I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry I overestimated your abilities and saw you as something more than who you really are."

Lee looked confused. "What are you trying to say...?"

Leaders...we're expected to do a lot and not fail. We're expected to make the right decisions, and sometimes the people who depend on us don't treat us as infallible human beings.

"It was hard, wasn't it?" I said softly, finally understanding where Jason was coming from. "You've done so much, but you felt like your father didn't care about you or the effort you put in, but only kept leaving you with more siblings to be responsible for. You felt like you were trapped, like you didn't have any free will."

Briefly, the departed son of Apollo was stunned, but his expression turned angry at my last statement. "I loved my siblings, Seth! I did not treat them like they were burdens-!"

"I know you did," I said, "but the sentiment only made it harder for you. You only tried so hard because you genuinely cared for each of them. If you hadn't, then you wouldn't have bothered. I know this because I was in that same situation at the orphanage. We have no control over who was the eldest or the youngest, but all the responsibility still landed on us anyway. I know how it feels."

"What do you know?" Lee said suspiciously. I noticed his hands moving to set up his bow, and my body tensed. "You've always had support! You may have lost your first home, but you quickly found a new place to belong! I helped you find your place! I helped you polish your skills! I was there for you every time you needed me! I helped you recover from your trauma! But the one time I needed you, you're no where to be found!"

Each reminder made the insides of my mouth taste sour. "I-I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it!" he snapped. "'Sorry' isn't going to change anything. It's not going to bring me back to life, and it won't excuse how you betrayed my trust or how much you've stolen from me!" That last accusation got me riled up.

"I didn't take anything from you!" I retorted. "You are your own person, Lee! No one can ever replace you in their life! I may try to be the big brother that the Apollo Cabin wants me to be, but you were the one they needed! You were the one that has always been a constant in their lives! Why do you keep on insisting that I stole everything-!"

"You have HIS APPROVAL!" Lee screeched, his eyes becoming watery again before he turned away. His voice sounded muffled as he repeated, "It's because you have his approval..." Without any clarification, I already knew who Lee meant.

I could only stare wordlessly as Lee lifted a hand to cover his tear-streaked face, his whole frame shaking uncontrollably. I've never seen Lee like this, and the sight pained me.
"What does Apollo see in you?" Lee rasped. "W-what do you have that I don't? After all the hard work I put in, all the food offerings I burned, and I don't get a single reply! But the moment you and Artemis are about to make a break-through, he invites you to his palace and even does favors for you?!

"L-Lee, I don't..." I wanted to tell Lee that Apollo had also threatened my life before, and how he and I weren't as chummy as he thought, but I closed my mouth, because from Lee's perspective, I did have a good 'relationship' with Apollo. Apollo always came whenever I requested it, and I definitely saw him a lot more than Lee or Will ever did. The truth made me feel bitter inside, and I suddenly felt like one of those detestable spoiled brats. The comparison made me feel rotten, and all the arguments I thought up died in my throat.

"Like, what was getting him to visit us on a whim all about?!!" Lee demanded. "Did you pity us? Was that it?! Or did you just want to flaunt how much Apollo cares about you and not us, his own children?! He may have given us gifts, but you...you have his favor!"

He lifted his bow, but this time, I was ready for it. I ran towards him, and tackled Lee down to the ground. He aimed a punch at my side, but I didn't feel it. I've had worse hits on me before, and Lee, frankly, didn't have enough strength added to his punches. He tried again, but not before I landed a solid punch to his chin's underside, making his eyes roll back as his body staggered away.

I watched him cautiously. At this point, I knew I had to put Lee down while I still had the advantage, but I didn't have the heart to do so. Not when my opponent was experiencing such anguish. I pitied him, and deep down, I didn't want to hurt him any more than I had. I told myself many times that this wasn't Lee, that the real Lee was dead and in Elysium, but I still couldn't muster up the resolve. Maybe...all I had to do was defeat him, and defeat didn't necessarily equate kill.

With that reassurance in mind, I charged at him, my goal only to immobilize and get this shade to submit. But Lee, of course, wasn't going to roll over and go down easily. He kept shooting at me, his hateful eyes now seared into my memories, and as I drew closer, he tossed aside his bow and finally brandished his sword. Our fight continuing from where it left off until...

...an arrow pierced through my chest, puncturing one of my lungs.

Instantly, my legs gave out, and my body crashed against the ground. Blood gushed out of my mouth, and I had trouble breathing. My elbows scrapped against the hard ground, and my shirt was soaked. Footsteps approached, and my eyes could only see the soles of Lee's sneakers. As I struggled to figure out how Lee managed to get me, another pair of boots appeared in my line of sight. I strained my eyes up, and when I saw who it was, the arrow in my chest burned—

*Not you too!*

Dark condescending eyes bore down at me. "Thou art still a disgrace, I see."

"I had him," Lee argued, standing beside the huntress with crossed arms. "You didn't need to cut in!"

"I allowed thee your turn. Now, it's mine. I will have the honor of erasing my Lady's greatest mistake, as befitting of my position."

Lee Fletcher and Zoë Nightshade. Deaths that I could have prevented, but failed to do so. The two of them never got along in life, but now they were united by one purpose. Their shadows loomed over me ominously, and victorious smiles emerged on their faces as they raised their weapons...

-o-
*Keep in mind that the Lee Fletcher in this chapter is only a manifestation of Seth's fears, and therefore is aware of everything Seth has experienced. The real Lee never knew about Seth seeing Apollo's palace or the favors Apollo has done for him. Since Lee's history and abilities was never analyzed fully in the books, I went ahead and made up his backstory to provide better characterization. His abilities are also purposely exaggerated to enhance the test's difficulty as well as illustrate how much Seth admires Lee.

NEXT CHAPTER: Seth Hunter vs. Lee and Zoë

A/N: So that concludes part 1 of the final exam! Be sure to tell me your thoughts, predictions, and/or opinions in your review. Also, since we're reaching the end of Seth's training, please tell me your thoughts on Walt, Lynetta, or any of the OCs I've introduced in this story thus far. Thanks for reading!
The Bet

Chapter Summary

In which Seth and Hunter strike a deal.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the very long wait. I have written so many drafts for this chapter and didn't like any of them until I wrote this one, which I still a little uncertain about. Further details are at the end of the chapter, as well as a very important announcement. Please be sure to read that, and without further delay, enjoy reading this pain-staking chapter.

Thank you all for your continued support and patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Just as their weapons fell, I heard the nearly inaudible pull of the trigger before rounds of gunfire sounded. Lee and Zoë were forced to leap out of the way while I struggled to get on my knees. My chest burned in agony, and could barely breathe with the excess amount of blood welling up like a broken faucet.

"What in Hades is going on here?" that familiar voice said, sounding less than amused. My eyes flicked up to see Hunter perched on a tall dark mound, smoking guns in both hands. Hunter widened his eyes in surprise when he noticed Lee and Zoë behind me; he didn't see me yet. "The hell- are you two supposed to be Zoë Nightshade and Lee Fletcher?"

"I believe that thou has answered thy own question," Zoë pointed out, twirling one of her knives.

"No way," Hunter muttered, shaking his head. His fingers pinched his cheek and he winced. "Huh, I'm not dreaming: I'm really seeing two dead people in my damn space. I decide to take a break and this is what happens. Looks like the Fates could still pull one over me, gods damn it!"

"Well, you better start believing it," Lee snarled, pointed his sword at Hunter, "you'll pay for that interruption, interloper-!"

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

"Interloper?!" Hunter said incredulously. He leaped down and landed on one knee, guns reshuffled and directed at both shades. Lee and Zoë had their weapons and shield raised and suddenly, they didn't look so confident anymore. "You sure got a lot of nerve, fakes, dissing the Master of the house you barged in uninvited. Leave now, or I'll make you pay my rent." Then, Hunter sniffed the air, and made a disgusted face. "This stink smells familiar..."

"Thou interrupted our fight," Zoë defended, her opinion on my counterpart getting worse. "That makes thee an interloper, you self-centered lout!"
"Go back to your silly vacation, Hunter," Lee taunted, "you'll get your turn after we deal with your other self."

"Deal with w—Seth?!" Hunter exclaimed, finally noticing me. I must be in really bad shape if I managed to make Hunter look like that. It was the first time I'd ever seen the Roman appear so aghast, his face palting in horror as he took in my perilous state. I looked away from his stare, suddenly mortified of my exposed vulnerability. I wished there was a hole I could crawl in somewhere and never come out again.

But what Hunter did next, chilled me to the bone:

"You fakes are so dead!" Hunter screeched.

For the next minute and a half, I had to endure the loud, piercing sounds of guns firing and bullet shells clashing against the floor. My counterpart kept shooting at the shades relentlessly. There was also a lot of yelling and screaming. Hunter was cursing and swearing so colorfully that hearing it would make any grandma's ears rot. Eventually, I heard a loud thump and a pair of hard soled shoes crossed my line of sight. I felt hands pulling me up carefully, but I pushed him away.

Hunter protested, "Seth!"

"Leave me alone!" I gasped, clenching my hand over the gaping wound. "Y-you didn't have a problem d-doing that for the last month."

I heard Hunter exhale, like he was about to say something but thought better of it. My eyes squeezed shut as pain shot through my body when I moved too much. My breaths were haggard, and I could feel my clothes cling to my sweaty skin. I looked like shit, but my wounds were nothing compared to the immense shame I felt under Hunter's unwanted scrutiny. I couldn't hear Zoë or Lee anywhere, so I assumed Hunter had taken care of them. He looked slightly battered, if not a little annoyed, but otherwise, he was fine.

His 'fine' condition irritated me, and for the first time, I felt a spurt of jealousy overcome me. I couldn't handle Lee on my own, and Hunter managed to take out Lee and Zoë at once without breaking much of a sweat?! I knew my counterpart was capable, but I thought I at least stood at equal footing with him during our last fight.

I've never been so wrong.

"You're bleeding out," Hunter said, still kneeling down beside me before he held out a piece of ambrosia in front of my face. "Take it." When I stared at it defiantly and made no move to accept his charity, his tone dropped ominously. "Take it...or I'll shove it in your mouth. Your choice."

I grabbed the ambrosia cake and popped it into my mouth a second later. I munched on it quickly, moving my jaw in exaggerated gestures to assure him that I was swallowing it down. Moments later, I sensed my wound closing and the pain ebbing away.

"Where's Lee and Zoë?" I decided to ask.

"Gone," Hunter confirmed. "You don't ever need to worry about them again."

"I can't see your fight." Hunter always relayed images of his fights so I knew how he defeated our enemies. It helped me gain a better understanding of his abilities and tactics.

"You're better off not knowing the details for this one," Hunter muttered, his eyes looking troubled before they blinked and returned to their state of apathy.*
"Why?" I demanded. "Why should I not know about this fight? What makes this one different from the others?"

"You're better off not knowing," Hunter repeated with more force. "Can you get up?"

I ignored his inquiry, my curiosity and suspicions more persistent than ever. Hunter looked away from me as I got up on my feet. "What are you not telling me, Hunter? Do you think I can't handle the violence? Is that it? Or is it something else?"

"I'm not answering that."

"I think I deserve some answers after all those stunts you pulled!" I exclaimed. "Killing people aside, what was up with that month-long absence? I tried contacting you but you never spoke up, and then out of nowhere you decide to interrupt my exam-!"

"I had no idea you were taking an exam," Hunter said coldly, his eyes narrowing to slits. "When I arrived, all I expected was getting rid of insects defiling our sacred ground."

"You would have known if you had talked to me," I pointed out.

Hunter clenched his jaw tightly, and placed a hand to his forehead. His actions mirrored the time I felt my frustration at its peak, and I had a feeling that was exactly what he was experiencing now. I guessed there were advantages in having identical facial features. "What do you want from me, Seth?"

What did I want from him? There were a lot of things that came to mind, but they were things I've already told Hunter about and he had refused to do them. I wanted him to stop killing. I didn't want him to torture monsters because he was better than that. I didn't like him scheming and plotting because it made him no better than our enemies, like Aphrodite. The goddess of love was a manipulative bitch that liked to toy with heroes in the myths. She didn't care who she had to use and break to get her point across. She hid behind an idealized concept meant to bring goodness and joy, before she used it to bring immeasurable pain.

I wanted Hunter to be honest with me. Was that so much to ask? First, I wasn't allowed to know about his future plans, and then he hid his conversation with Diana, and now this fight. I've realized that I couldn't hide anything from Hunter since his conversation with Lappy. It wasn't fair that he could hide things from me when I wasn't offered the same privilege, which was stripped away from me the moment Hunter showed up—or was it before that? Hunter had been here long before he decided to expose himself. He's hinted that much at least.

I wanted our partnership to work just as much as Hunter did. I didn't like arguing or fighting him all the time. I didn't like taking on the role of the nagging parent. Those adults were annoying. I looked up at Hunter, who regarded me carefully in silence. He's been waiting patiently for my answer, and his eyes never left mine.

"I want you to trust me," I said at last. The darkness started to fade away, and within moments, I recognized my mental room taking shape around us. The silver flames flickered brightly in the fireplace, and the red lighted chandeliers hanged around ominously. "That's what you want from me since the beginning, wasn't it? But how can I trust you, when you don't even try?"

Hunter stiffened, "I do trust you..."

"If you trusted me, then you wouldn't be holding on to so many secrets," I pointed out. "You'd be open about them because you'd know that I'd accept them and try to help you."
"That's..." Hunter looked away, placing a hand over his mouth. For once, the Roman looked conflicted. "Seth, you don't know what you're asking for. These 'secrets' you accuse me of withholding—I can't share them. No matter what."

I forced myself to exhale, and try to clear out my thoughts before I spoke, "Can you at least tell me why?"

"I don't know if I can," Hunter confessed, "the 'why' is just as crucial as the 'what'—I can't afford having you get any ideas about them."

"Isn't there anything you can tell me?" I exclaimed. What secrets could Hunter be holding that would make him so nervous? When Hunter remained silent, I became annoyed. "Well, it's nice to finally know how little you trust me with your problems." Hunter mumbled something incoherent. "What did you say?"

Hunter met my gaze with a glare. "I said I was only returning the favor- you don't trust me a bit, and you hate how I work. You say that you want us to be able to work together, but why am I the only one contributing?! It's always me that ends up giving up my time and my ways for this partnership to work!"

"I am contributing!" I said indignantly. "You've no idea how tolerant I've been! I allowed you to keep your secrets while my secrets are forced out! The only reason why I'm asking you to spill is because I got tired of dealing with your shit without a good reason behind them!"

"I already told you my reasons!" Hunter snapped. Already, the embers of our last fight began to ignite. "It's your silly ideals that's making you block them out-!"

"Quit using 'ideology' as an excuse!" I retorted back. "I'm not here to talk about our ideals because we both know how well that ended last time!"

"Then what else are you going to talk about?" Hunter sneered, crossing his arms. "Are you going to give me a lecture again? Another prissy fit?"

I ignored his attempts to rile me. That was how Hunter beaten me before. During the last month, I've analyzed the way my counterpart fought and strategized in order to help me gain a better understanding of him. Since I wasn't getting any response from him directly, I decided to spend an hour each night before going to bed visualizing and going over his thought process and came up with two definitive conclusions:

One, Hunter tends to taunt his opponents to gain the upper hand. It explained how he was able to beat me last time. Most believed that taunting an enemy into striking was a symptom of arrogance, and for most cases, that would be true. Hunter was cocky, but he timed his taunts whenever he sensed an opponent's breaking point. He realized how close I was about to snap during our last fight, and he also did that to Ms. See and manipulated her into doing what he wanted. That involved a lot of cunning and insight that I now knew Hunter had plenty of. Some would say it was a coward's trick, but I couldn't deny its effectiveness.

That led into my second conclusion: Hunter worshipped logic. During our entire debate, that was all he used to counter my arguments. He believed in definitive proof, results, and efficiency. Anything else outside that realm of logic, Hunter dismissed as flimsy, bias, and false. He told me he didn't believe in love because it was irrational, and replaced it with an 'obligation system' that could be explained using equal exchanges and deals. He dismissed any and all morality standpoints because morals were subjective.
This meant, that if I was going to get through to Hunter, and let him see his flaws, then I have to fight logic with logic.

"Hunter, have you ever heard of the Uncertainty Principle?"

"You mean, Heisenberg's principle relating to quantum physics?" Hunter specified, his face looking confused by my direction briefly, before he wiped it blank again. I nodded.

"Heisenberg's Uncertainty principle theorizes that it is impossible to know the exact position and momentum of a particle simultaneously. The more you know the exact position of a particle..."

"...the less you know about the momentum," Hunter finished. "Yes, I know what it is. I learned quantum physics with you during your lessons with Lynetta. What about it?"

"Do you believe in this principle?" I asked. "Would you think it was...logical?"

"Of course," Hunter answered immediately, "there is an equation created for it, and it has been used to determine wave-particle duality and functions, and it aligns with other proven theories like Planck's constant, Einstein's formula, and DeBroglie's Hypothesis that a wavelength expression for a particle is related to a photon's momentum. With so many proofs, it's impossible to say that it is not logical or otherwise."

I had to take a moment to absorb everything Hunter said. I liked physics, but even quantum physics was a handful for me to understand. I couldn't believe the Roman remembered all the theories and terms so quickly. "That's right. That's why the Uncertainty Principle is valid. One cannot determine position and its direction at the same time, and that's why your 'preventive measures', in which you argue knowing an opponent's current motives and how it'd impact our future, is wrong."

Hunter frowned, at this point, his attention was completely captured. "The Uncertainty Principle is valid for scientific and object applications. The closest thing you can apply this principle to real life is the number of wavelengths and photons a computer system uses. It's purely mechanical!"

"Not so," I argued. "There are many real-life applications that can be substitute using this principle, like being absolutely precise on the final destination (the position) and the exact route you take leading up to that destination (the momentum). There is also a trade-off between accuracy and precision and the flexibility. The more precise you make something, the less flexibility there is in making it the way you do it. This also means that you can't determine your objectives and your strategies (the means you use to achieve said objectives) all at once."

"In your case," I continued, "you can't claim that taking an opponent's life at a current circumstance (the definitive position) and say the kill is justified because it ensures our goals, because the path in reaching those goals (the momentum) can't be seen simultaneously."

"Those are only similarities!" Hunter exclaimed, his face reddening in frustration. "You can't use the Uncertainty Principle for...for something like that!"

"Maybe you're right," I admitted. "Maybe they are only similarities. Honestly, I only used the Uncertainty Principle as an example to highlight my claim's own mechanics, and get your attention. Whether the principle applied to what I said or not doesn't matter, Hunter. What matters is that you realize that my claims against your methods does not hold less merit than a proven logical equation."

"Your methods are only effective on the short-term," I stressed. "We can only predict and manipulate what happens after in a short time span. You stopped Octavian from blackmailing us, but you can't know if we'd see the Romans again are not, their reactions when they realize their augur is missing.
and whether they’d still end up suspecting us and using whatever means they can to finding us. Those are factors you dismissed because you think you know how others will think!"

"We're not going back to Camp Jupiter," Hunter said adamantly. "That's an action we can control. They also don't know who we are-!"

"Jason knows you're a child of Diana," I pointed out. "That limits down the population to only one. All he has to do is ask the right people, like the gods or hunters of Artemis for instance, and that'll narrow down where we'd be."

Hunter scoffed, "like they would tell him anything."

"Even without Jason to worry about," I began, "don't you find it odd why we'd learn about the Romans? Why I'd end up having a Roman counterpart like you? Why we were given the privilege to learn from a Roman instructor when Artemis could have chosen another or forfeit the idea? I don't believe this is a coincidence. I have a feeling we'll see the Romans again whether we want to or not."

"You sound like one of those paranoid conspirators," Hunter replied coolly, but I could tell he was starting to look unsure, "we won't go back to Camp Jupiter, and we won't see any Romans besides Walt ever again. Whatever I told Jason will be dismissed as a lie. No one's going to accept that there's a child of Artemis running around! Even Atlas had laughed and thought it was a joke when Luke told him about you! The Romans are going to be the same way."

"Is that a fact?"

"I will make it a fact," Hunter said, "and the gods would probably give us a hand too. Can't afford having another Roman know about you. I guess they're the more paranoid bunch."

"We're getting off topic," I realized, and released a sigh. I suddenly felt more winded now than when I was bleeding out. Dealing with Hunter was always stressful. "The point is, there's too much uncertainty in your actions. You say that risk is needed if we are to gain anything, but we can also lose more than what we get if we continue on like this! I'll admit that it's mere speculation, but it isn't any less valid than your claim of gaining more."

When Hunter remained silent, I took that as a small victory. It meant he was seriously considering what I said instead of ignoring them like they were a childish mindset like he did last time.

"You can't dismiss my arguments like its gibberish, Hunter," I said with a new confidence. I dared myself to take a couple steps closer until I looked my counterpart in the eye. "You like being absolute. You like being right, but I guess your methods aren't so foolproof after all if I could puncture a hole into it."

"Your argument was much better than what I expected from you," Hunter admitted, "but if you want me to conform to your standards..."

Suddenly, his hand grasped the front of my shirt tightly as he tugged me forward. I yelped when I felt Hunter's face press close to my ear.

"...you're going to have to do a lot better than using a little principle to change ME," Hunter hissed, his grip tightening even further as I wrapped one of my hands around his wrist to make him let go. "I have no interest in becoming your little pet project, Seth. I am who I am, and I won't let anyone change that without a fight. Knowing you though, I'm sure you're not going to back down no matter how foolhardy it is."

"You're right to assume that," I said through clenched teeth.
Hunter chuckled a bit. "Yeah, I know." He let go of me and backed away with a smirk on his face. "You want things to go your way while I want things to go my way. We want things to work out between us, but neither of us are willing to give in. There's no middle ground. That's why, I propose a bet- if you win, I'll accept things your way with no complaints, but if I win..."

"...then I'll have to accept yours," I finished warily. It was a win all or lose all. The kind of game Hunter loved doing too much.

"Exactly!" Hunter beamed, his smile as wide as a child's on Christmas morning. "I've been willing to listen and follow your no violence rule ever since you suggested it, and don't give me that look—murdering someone is not the same as torture! They hardly felt any pain when they left, but that's beside the point- if I win this bet, I'd have the freedom to not follow those rules anymore, but if you win, then I'll obey these rules and more. In fact, if you ask me about my plans, I'll tell you without holding back."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. "You would? But you just said..."

"I'll compromise that much if and only if you win," Hunter said seriously, and I could tell he meant it. "You want to know about my plans? You want to know what I did with those fakes or what I talked about with Diana? It's all yours to know. If you lose or decide not to take the bet, you're not getting a single peep about my plans for as long as I live."

"You're really sugar-coating this bet a lot," I remarked dryly. "You still haven't told me what the bet is. Afraid I'd reject it?"

"You'll know if you agree to take it."

"That's not fair," I argued, "what if the bet is favored towards you? You're already making the conditions."

"Don't worry," Hunter promised, "I assure you'll have a decent chance to win. Speaking of conditions, we are not allowed to tell anyone else about the bet or get their help. Whoever wins this bet will do so by their own power and will. You also have to give me my time in sharing this body so I'd get the chance to fulfill said bet too. It wouldn't be fair if you kept hogging our body."

"I suppose that's reasonable," I murmured.

"So, are you willing to take it?" Hunter grinned. "It's a one-time deal."

*I want to take it...*

If I won, then I would get Hunter to listen and comply with my methods willingly. I'd also get to know what his plans were, and that information was likely a gold mine if Hunter was being so sneaky about it. But if I lost, I'd have to let Hunter to do what he wanted and I'd have no say about it. But wasn't that what would happen to him if he lost?

*How come I'm the only one contributing?!*

Hunter was relinquishing a lot of things on this bet. He might be losing more than what I'd lose if the other won. Before I chose to agree, I had to make sure of something.

"If I agree to take your bet," I began, "will you still follow the policies you promised to keep for me in the mean time?"

Hunter nodded. "Yes, I won't torture any enemies, and refrain from using excessive violence like
you wanted. I'll also remain truthful to any inquiries you have of me, but I'd get the choice to withhold any information concerning my plans. Until I win the bet, you have my word that I won't break my promises to you."

"If you win," I corrected, "if I win, you're following these rules until the day we die and those plans will be the first thing I'm asking you to spill."

"Is that a yes?"

"Let's hear your bet," I answered.

"Alright, now we're talking!" Hunter smirked, and he sat down on the sofa, his arms spread out. I joined him by sitting down in front of him. "My proposed bet centers around one person and that person alone."

"A person?" I questioned. "Who..."

"Clare Evergreen."

It took me a second for my mind to register what Hunter revealed, and once it did, my mouth was moving and lashing out protests.

"Not her!" I shouted, standing up. Hunter looked up at me blankly. "Choose someone else! I can't do that to Katie-!"

"Sheesh, will you calm down for a sec," Hunter muttered with a roll of his eyes. "You're acting like I'm telling you to kill Clare."

"What else will you say?" I retorted. "I know how much you hate her!"

"You'd know that wasn't what I was proposing if you didn't assume so much and let me explain," the Roman said narrowly, annoyed. His words finally got to me, and I quickly sat down, sheepish at how badly I panicked. "Now that you've calmed down, I'll tell you the bet. It's funny that you mentioned Katie, because I got the idea from her."

I widened my eyes. "You mean..."

"Save Clare Evergreen," Hunter said at last. "That is the bet. You have until August 18th, Percy's sixteenth birthday, to convert her. If you can genuinely get a Titan supporter like her to change sides and fight for the gods before that day arrives, then you win." He smiled when he noticed how stunned I was. I didn't expect this kind of bet from him. "We'll be seeing her again soon, right? Use this opportunity to convert her back to our cause. If you manage that, then I'd rest my case and I'll do as you say. You'd also make Katie very happy." He gave a laugh at that.

"T-that's all it'll take?" I said incredulously, causing Hunter to look at me strangely.

"Were you expecting something different?" he asked. "Or do you think this condition is too easy for you?"

I shook my head. "No, this bet is difficult. I have no doubt about that. It's just, I find it hard to believe that you'd be willing to change if I can save Clare."

Hunter looked away, his face lingering on the bright fireplace. "I'm a cynical misanthrope, Seth. I lost my faith in humanity a long time ago. I believe they are a corrupt race better off dying in their pool of prejudices and self-inflicted violence than letting them get an outside intervention saving their
asses while they live in blissful ignorance. If you can save someone like Clare, who I believe is one of the worst of these mortals, then you'd restore my faith. I'd be able to see why you do what you do, and gladly adopt your ideals as my own.

"However," Hunter said, his tone quickly growing cold, "if that traitorous bitch decides to try anything funny and harm you in anyway..." He lifted his hand and sliced the air before his neck. I swallowed uncomfortably as I got the message loud and clear. "I'll show her how much I don't give a shit about the power of friendship!" Hunter mocked with a high-pitched voice before his expression turned solemn.

"I will end her," Hunter said darkly, his voice so filled with malice and hate that the atmosphere around us seemed to turn even gloomier. "The moment Clare dies by my hand will be the moment I win this bet. If Clare remains a staunch Titan supporter after the deadline, then I also win. You will listen to me, and follow my rules for as long as I live."

"It won't come to that," I said firmly.

The final exam was over, concluded by a surprised interruption by my counterpart, and I wasn't satisfied. It didn't feel complete, and the exam exposed flaws I thought I had overcome and it also revealed new revelations I had no answers for. I thought Hunter was my equal. He was everything I wanted to be, but he was also something I wished I never had to lay my eyes on. I thought I was starting to understand him, but now, it appeared that I just opened a fresh can of worms.

"I hope for your sake and for hers, that you are right," Hunter said as he stood up and held out a hand. "Repeat after me, Seth: I swear on the Styx that I will uphold the conditions of our bet. There's no point in a bet that isn't binding."

"I agree," I muttered before I took his offered hand. His grip was firm, and so was mine. "I swear on the Styx that I will uphold the conditions of our bet. I will save Clare, Hunter. Just you watch. I'll make sure Katie sees her sister again, and I'll get back the friend I lost. You will change for the better, and you won't regret it."

Hunter looked amused, and our hands parted. "We'll see about that soon enough. Time flies by fast when you least expect it. I look forward to seeing you prove me wrong, Seth."

I was slightly surprised by how optimistic he sounded. I thought he'd try to rile me. If nothing else, at least Hunter had good sportsmanship. I could appreciate that side of him.

"You better," I said, "and also...you never told me why you ignored me for the last month."

"Oh, that," Hunter dismissed. "I was tired and I decided to take a break."

I was dumbfounded. "T-that's it?! Y-you're weren't holding a grudge or something..."

"Oh please," the Roman rolled his eyes. "You think you got to me during our last spat? I won that fight and that debate was great! There was nothing you could have said that got me down! I just slept like a log in my top secret bat-cave where I concoct all my secret plans until I sensed those pesky insects bothering you." At that, he stretched out his arms and yawned. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I still need to catch up on my beauty sleep. Talk to you later!"

Wordlessly, Hunter walked past me without another glance and walked out the door, the shadows engulfing his entire presence as he disappeared from view.

"Unbelievable," I said a moment later. "The nerve of that guy...hibernating like a damn bear while I worry my ass off...I'm so done with this. I am so done!"
"Are you awake, Seth?" I heard Lynetta ask hesitantly as soon as I stirred. I was lying in a bed, and there was this misty grey shroud that smelled like the dead over my face before I snatched it off, about to throw it on the ground and away from my sensitive nose before Lynetta caught it. "Be careful with that!"

"That shroud smells like it was recently used on a corpse," I said, wrinkling my nose. "Why did I have that on my face? You didn't assume I was dead...?"

"This shroud belongs to Melinoe, the goddess of ghosts and daughter of Lord Hades. Whoever wore this shroud would fall into a deep slumber and experience their haunts until the wearer can face them without fear," she explained. **

"Oh. So that's how you guys did it," I realized, looking at the shroud clenched in Lynetta's hands. "That piece of cloth was my final exam." Then, I looked beside me and noticed a heart monitor. There was gauze and plastic tubes wrapped around my right wrist and pressed against my chest. "What's this for?"

"There are cases when a student is too overpowered by their haunts that he or she goes into cardiogenic shock. The monitor is here for us to prevent that from happening again."

"Again? You mean a student has died from having this shroud over their head?" I questioned. Lynetta nodded, "It was unfortunate, and an experience Walt and I never wish to repeat. A while ago, I thought I had to take the shroud off you when your heart rate started to go out of control, but then, it calmed down again so quickly that I didn't. I do wonder how that happened."

She must be referring to how Zoë shot me. I thought I was dying until Hunter forced me to eat an ambrosia cake. That must be the reason behind my recovery. Now that I thought about it, why didn't I summon any ambrosia cake on my own?! Did the thought never occur to me? Or did I somehow know I wasn't able to and didn't bother to try? I'd have test that theory later.

"We are not going to ask for the details," Lynetta informed. "Whatever haunts you faced is private and your choice to share. Since you managed to wake up in less than a week's time with no apparent side-effects, then we can safely assume that you passed the final exam to our satisfaction."

"What if I don't feel satisfied?" I asked. Lynetta looked confused. "I may be awake and fine, but the exam doesn't feel complete. I...I had Hunter's help at the end, Lynetta. If it weren't for his help, then you'd pull off the shroud and I would have failed. I didn't pass this exam on my own."

Lynetta smiled, "Seth, how do you see Hunter?"

"An obnoxious brat," I said at once, before thinking about it some more. "My partner, my best friend, worst enemy, violent twin, and the Roman counterpart I never knew I had...needed. He completes me, Lynetta," I said quietly and laughed softly when I realized what that sounded like. "I know it sounds like a sappy line in a romance novel, but that's what Hunter is to me. He's fulfills the areas I am weak in and his way of thinking...sort of complements mine."

"It's not sappy if it's the truth," she pointed out, "but I think that kind of answer explains why you feel so unsatisfied, Seth."

"How?"

"You still see Hunter as a separate entity, when he's actually you, Seth," Lynetta explained. "No
matter how different his personality is, you and he are one and the same. That means his accomplishments are yours, Seth."

"Yeah, and that applies to his downfalls too," I groaned, placing my head in my hands. Lynetta sighed, placing a soothing hand on my shoulder as she sat down on the edge of my bed.

"Didn't I tell you that you are too hard on yourself?"

"You did," I recalled, "but I don't think I was the one answering."

"It doesn't matter who answers," she said, "when it applies to both of you." She let her hand drop and her gray eyes glanced at my face with concern. "Are you feeling hungry by any chance? It's been five days."

"Yeah," I muttered, finally noticing my empty stomach. I moved my legs to the side and got up to walk around. "Food will be nice."

"I'll carry up a tray," Lynetta offered. "For now, rest up while I inform Walt of your awakening. Congratulations."

I forced a smile. Despite hearing her encouragement, I couldn't feel any elation. Lynetta didn't know about the bet Hunter made me swear not to tell anyone, or how I'd never know how Hunter defeated Lee and Zoë until I win. Soon, Lynetta left the room, and I went into my bathroom to wash up.

After taking a shower, and changing into cleaner clothes, I was drying my hair when my eyes carelessly wandered over to the mirror and caused my body to seize up in fright. The identical boy in the mirror followed my movements and looked just as startled as me. A second later, I relaxed and felt silly for getting scared. I had thought I saw Hunter before realizing that I was in the 'outside world', in full control of my body.

*Next thing I know, I'd be jumping from my own shadow,* I thought humorlessly, before another awful thought occurred—

"Am I...scared of Hunter?" I whispered aloud, staring at my reflection. The silver-eyed teen stared back, and for some reason, he didn't look that confident. This was the boy who was about to infiltrate the Titan Army and be the key to victory?! What in Hades! There's no way a kid looking this weak could do it!

"I'm not weak," I hissed, scowling and giving the best glare I could make. Oh look, the kid looked much tougher now. "I've been waiting for this. I passed Walt's training! Not many demigods could do that. I...I traveled with the hunters and got out alive. That's a great feat for a guy, right?"

The boy looked insecure again.

"No. *None of that!*" I said as I shook my head vehemently, and shook my fist at the mirror. "I got this spy thing in the bag! I am awesome! Greater than awesome! Better than...awesome. Yeah, okay that sounded way too pompous for me. I'm not Apollo, I'm just...me. Just me, and me is...okay, right? I'm okay. I got my archery equipment, Nightwalker and Dark Hacker, and my new artillery weapons with me...and that Spear of Diomedes still stuck in my closet. I got great combat moves to show, and swordsmanship! Right, I can wield a sword. Percy will never believe me if I said I could fight with a sword now!

"Those monsters will never know what hit them!" I continued. "I took down a Laistrygonian King and his gang of followers all by myself! I got my trusted beagle to deal with those awful skeletons! Hunter could fight through an army of monsters bare-handed! He shot a griffin right through its head..."
and blew up a Titan camp with a bazooka! I dealt with acid-spitting snakes, snake-ladies, earth bound monsters in loincloth, and I got beat up by Artemis... and lived! How amazing is that?"

While I was absorbed by my ramblings, I didn't notice Lappy had walked in the room.

"What would Hunter usually say?" I muttered to myself, my back towards the beagle who slowly climbed up my bed to see what I was doing. I put my hands on my hips, made a crude imitation of that jerk's smirking face, and said, "Seth, you are so wrong and I am so right! I eat hellhounds for breakfast and I kill people for the sake of goals that you can know nothing about! Your morality issues are rubbish and I act like a baby because I am one! I'm the jerk king of asses and the master of douchebaggery!"

Suddenly, I burst out laughing. I laughed and laughed until my legs couldn't take it anymore and sat down on my chair. I just found another advantage in having shared facial features with my counterpart and I was enjoying the Hades out of it until I finally looked up and saw Lappy, who stared at me with his mouth agape.

"Oh my gods, when did you get in here, Lappy?!" I exclaimed in horror, my face turning into a shade of pink.

"W-when you were... imitating Hunter?" Lappy said, hesitant. I groaned, and face-planted my head against my desk, mortified.

"I-It's not what you think," I muttered at my desk. "I...I was being silly. Really silly. Please don't tell Artemis what you just saw."

There's nothing wrong about 'being silly', Lappy reassured, leaping off the bed and sitting down on his hind legs in front of me. And I promise I won't tell Artemis anything you don't want me to say. But even if I do tell her, I think my Lady would be relieved to see you acting your age.

I snorted, "Acting my age? What is 'acting my age' supposed to mean? I doubt every fifteen year old acts this ridiculous all the time."

No, but I doubt every fifteen year old acts as mature as you do most of the time, Lappy said back.

"Thanks for the compliment," I mumbled, and when I looked up, I finally noticed the tray of food Lynetta had placed on one end of my bed. She must have dropped by while I was showering. I quickly walked over and popped a couple grapes into my mouth before swallowing it down with apple juice. I was starving. I grabbed the grilled cheese and bacon sandwich.

I was still busy munching when Lappy said, if I may ask, what brought on that 'silly' display?

I shrugged, "Don't know- maybe the stress is finally getting to my head. Hunter's an asshole, and I finally completed Walt's training in record time. Now, instead of being surrounded by you and two respected adults, I have to start playing nice with a bunch of traitors and hurt my friends in the process."

What do you mean? Lappy said. Do you not want me beside you while you are with the Titan Army?

I sighed, wondering how I was going to explain this. I had thought over whether I should take Lappy with me while I went undercover, and decided that I wouldn't take him. It was too risky to have Artemis' well known and very loyal familiar to accompany her supposedly rebellious kid who wanted nothing from her. My cover would be jeopardized, and I didn't want to force Lappy into doing things he wouldn't do otherwise, like hurting the hunters of Artemis. The Titans would use Lappy for his tracking ability, or worse, they'd kill him. I would never forgive myself if I got Lappy
hurt for my sake.

"I don't want you to risk your life," I told Lappy carefully. "I don't want the Titans to use you to hurt
our friends. I can't take you with me."

_I see, Lappy replied, those are good reasons, and I agree that being with you will do you more harm
than good. Remember, Seth—even if I'm not beside you, I will ALWAYS be there if you need help. If
you ever need to get out and escape...

"I'll call you," I promised. "250 miles, right? That's as far as you can go and still hear my calls. I'll be
depending on you to relay any information I find to Artemis and the hunters. You will be my go-
between for them while Chiron will be my contact for Camp Half-Blood."

_I understand, and I'll also inform her of your wellbeing and relay any information Lady Artemis
wishes to pass to you.

"Great," I said, starting to relax a little. "That's really great."

_Remember what you are fighting for, Seth, Lappy advised. Whenever you feel alone, or you think
everything you're doing is hopeless or not going the way you want-try to remember that. I think...that
will help.

"Thank you, Lappy," I said quietly. "I'll keep that in mind." Smiling, I opened up my arms and
Lappy crawled onto my lap, his paws pressed against my chest. I held the beagle close to me, my
chin nuzzling against his fur coat. I wondered if the beagle could hear how fast my heart was
beating. "Thank you for always being beside me, Lappy. You're the best familiar anyone could ask
for."

_You're a good master too.

Before I could reply, I heard someone approach and saw Lynetta at the door. She noticed the beagle
in my lap but didn't say anything about it.

"Mr. Forger can see you now," Lynetta informed.

I nodded, and Lappy and I followed her out of my room.

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Chapter End Notes

* After writing draft after draft, I decided that it was better to omit Hunter's fight against
Zoë and Lee until I reveal Hunter's secrets and plans later on. I do have a legit reason
why Hunter is not telling Seth anything, and this secrecy was what kept screwing me up
when I decided to write out the fight in my earlier drafts.

** In The Demigod Files, Melinoe is the goddess of ghosts and the daughter of Hades
and Persephone, like canon, she is also one of the minor deities who joined the Titans.
When she faced off against Thalia and Nico, she had shapeshifted into their mothers
because they were deaths the two regretted. Her shroud is similar to Aphrodite's (the one
Percy found in the Tunnel of Love chapter) in that it incorporates some of her abilities.
Lee and Zoë are deaths Seth regretted, and for his other tests, I expanded Melinoe's
realm of power to include past traumas and fears for narrative purposes.

A/N: So that concludes this chapter. If there are any physics buffs reading this, know that I'm not an expert on the Uncertainty Principle or anything to do with quantum physics, and had looked up the analogies with a quick Google search. Also, BIG FYI, the next chapter will be the last one for this story. I decided to pull a Christopher Paolini move and split the third part into two. A reviewer had suggested this idea before and it is only recently that I decided to follow through. Personally, I like having some breathing space when reading a long series like this one, and it would help me keep track on important details I had saved if I split the story up and even it out. I'll give more details about this decision in the next chapter, which will come out soon.

Thank you all for reading and be sure to leave a comment to tell me what you think!
A Good Man

Chapter Summary

In which Seth reveals who he truly is, and some good (much needed) communication occurs.

Chapter Notes

A/N: At last, I present to you the last chapter of this story- containing over 12,900 words! I've set a record! I hope that makes up for the long wait :/ Thank you all for your comments and the continued support! This series would not have gotten this far without them!

This chapter will contain scenes and revelations I'm sure many of you have been waiting for. I've debated whether I should push these scenes back, but in the end, decided to leave them as a nice finishing touch. Enjoy the angst-ridden and fluffy chapter! You have been warned.

*This chapter was inspired by the song 'Believe' by Hollywood Undead. I highly recommend it!*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Congratulations, Seth Hunter," I heard Walt say when I entered the room. I looked up to see my mentor looking at me with a slight fondness, his back resting against his chair behind his desk. "You finished my training, and you've beaten Lynetta's record by ten days. What do you have to say about that?"

Lynetta closed the door behind us, and gestured for me to take a seat before Walt. I did so quietly before I replied, "I'm not satisfied."

"Why not?" he wondered, not looking surprised, or anything.

"I don't feel stronger than I was a month before," I confessed, "that final exam...it exposed so many weaknesses that I thought I overcame, but didn't. Instead of feeling strong and prepared, I...I'm starting to doubt if I really deserve to graduate from your training or not."

No matter what Lynetta tried to assure me, I could not claim Hunter's accomplishments as my own. How could I, when I had no idea how he won? Hunter was getting stronger and more powerful by the day. He was getting bolder, his moves more daring, and his words snarkier than ever. I wanted to give Hunter the benefit of the doubt, but after everything that has happened...

Lynetta unintentionally interrupted my train of thought. "Seth, those feelings are normal. Do you think I didn't have doubts after experiencing so much vulnerability? The purpose of this final isn't meant to be a reassurance of your power, but to humble you and make you realize that you're not weak."
"I don't follow," I said, slightly confused.

"You're not weak," Lynetta repeated. "It's not the same as saying 'you are strong' or 'you are not strong'. If you are strong, then you have no weaknesses. If you are not strong, then you have no strengths. By claiming that 'you are not weak' places you between these extreme statuses. In order to pass this exam, you must have demonstrated resilience, determination, and courage against the odds stacked against you. That was the only way you could have passed, and you did.

"You are worthy of completing Mr. Forger's training," she said, her lips turning up slightly. Her gray eyes seemed to shimmer with an unseen emotion. "Hold your head up high, Seth, and be proud of what you've achieved. You've beaten my record, and before I forget—Mr. Forger, I believe it's time you give me my due."

Walt rolled his eyes, and grumbled something about 'never betting against Athena kids ever again' when he reached over his desk, pulled out what looked like a bag of drachmas from one drawer and tossed it to Lynetta, who caught it easily with a playful smirk. I quickly understood the situation.

"You guys betted on me?" I asked.

Lynetta nodded, "The bet was whether you could beat my record or not. Winner gets fifty drachmas, and decides what the next three exams should be for our next student." She eyed her newly earned prize a bit longer before placing it against her clipboard. "I've been wanting to buy that imperial gold halberd I saw on Amazon."

"Couldn't you ask Walt to buy it for you?" I questioned. It wasn't like Walt didn't have any money. To my knowledge, he was plenty rich in mortal, Greek, and Roman currency.

"Well," Lynetta began, looking at Walt with clear pleasure while the latter looked away with his remaining dignity. "I could ask him, and he'd pay for it, but it wouldn't feel as satisfying."

"So there you have it," Walt cut in, wishing to change the topic quickly. "All good things must come to an end, and as your mentor, I officially announce the end of your training with me. You will be given till the end of this week to pack up. I will also be handing you some gifts I prepared before you depart. Lynetta will also handle your transportation if you require it."

"Yes," I said, dipping my head to Walt, and then to Lynetta. "Thank you for everything you taught me. Under your guidance, I've accomplish things I never believed I could do on my own, and for that, I will remain forever grateful."

Walt nodded. "Seth Hunter, it has been a privilege for me and Lynetta to be your mentors. Though your journey here has ended, know that you are still welcomed to visit and stay in touch with us."

Walt offered his hand, and I shook it respectfully. Since I arrived, it was always me serving Walt and Lynetta, respecting their wishes and doing whatever tasks they assigned me. They were my mentors, my superiors, but at that moment, the lines have blurred and faded away. Now, Walt looked at me like he did with Lynetta—an equal. My face flushed at this new revelation; I've never felt so honored.

"I'll make sure to do just that," I said firmly, responding to his latter offer. However, there were a couple things I still wondered about. "Walt, I think you might have hinted this earlier, but what will you and Lynetta do in the coming war?"

"I cannot get involved directly," Walt said tightly, his face downcast, "the gods do not permit me to do so, and Lynetta has chosen to follow my lead. But even if we do not participate in the frontlines,
we will provide communication and Intel to the gods, and if good old Chiron calls, then I'll provide that Intel to Camp Half-Blood too."

"You seem to get along with Chiron very well," I began, "he told me how he met you."

Walt blinked in surprise, before he chuckled slowly, "He did, huh? What did he tell you?"

"He told me how you were around my age when you visited Camp Half-Blood for the first and last time," I recalled. "He also told me how you couldn't stand the place because of your Roman lineage, and quickly left for Massachusetts after that." I looked at the elder demigod curiously. "You...never told me why you left Camp Jupiter, Walt, or why the gods wouldn't let you leave this place. I also never understood how and why you agreed to train Greek demigods..." I faltered when I noticed how Walt was only staring at me in silence, his solemn dark eyes narrowed, troubled.

I quickly retracted my words. "I'm sorry if I pried too much. I won't force you."

"I have my reasons," Walt muttered, "but I don't believe this is the time for you to know them. My history is...complicated, and I rather not rope you or anybody else into it unless the situation demands it. You're better off not knowing."

"You're better off not knowing."

I gritted my teeth, trying very hard to keep my frustration at bay. Why did everyone insist on keeping me in the dark? Did they believe I wouldn't understand? That I couldn't be trusted? Someone who wasn't mature enough to take it? No matter how frustrated I was though, I held back my protests- I already said I wouldn't force Walt to tell me. It was my policy to keep my promises, and my respect for the man also made it easier for me to accept his answer.

"I understand," I said, and I could see how relieved Walt was about my compliance.

He nodded. "Live, and never regret, Seth Hunter. You have a hard path ahead of you. Keep in mind what lies at the end, remember the why, instead of focusing solely on what's happening around you. The ends justify the means only when you are there to see them take place."

"He's right, Hunter spoke up, and his solemn tone caught me off guard. It's been a while since I heard him speak again like this. We need to take care of ourselves before we bother with anyone else. You WILL be there to the very end, Seth. Prophecy be damned.

I know, Hunter, I thought back. Our fate is our own. We'll make sure of that.

Damn right we will.

-0-

Two days before I was supposed to pack up and head out to Louisville, I asked Lynetta if she could drive me to the bus station that would take me to New York. Lappy had already left to inform Artemis of my success and departure, and made me promise me again to stay in touch and call for him if I needed it. I complied to his request easily, and embraced the beagle with shaky arms before the large bloodhound let out a howl and sped off. Lynetta and I also shared a hug when she dropped me off. I looked down on my hand-written list of directions before I found the store I was searching for.

The warm air blasted against my face the moment I entered the familiar flower boutique. The drastic change in temperature made me take off the ear warmers, and stuff it in one of my dark trench coat pockets. I loosened the silvery gray scarf I had wrapped around my neck, and quickly shed off the
gloves as I browsed their selection. My silver eyes finally spotted the white tulips, and I gently took one of the bushels and walked up to the register. To my surprise, the mortal cashier running it recognized me.

"Hello again!" she exclaimed when I walked up. She must have noticed my confusion when she clarified, "I'm Katelyn; I helped you with your purchase last time?"

Who is she...? Suddenly, a flash came across my mind, and I quickly remember who this was.

Thanks, Hunter.

No prob.

"I remember," I said, smiling sheepishly. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you at first, but it's been nearly a year since I was here. Your memory's very good."

Katelyn shook her head, smiling in return. "It's not that at all—when you came, it was my first day working here, and you made quite an impression. It's not everyday someone made me appear insensitive."

An impression, huh? Hunter murmured, sounding skeptical. Right...

"I'm sorry?" I said hesitantly.

"Don't be; it was a valuable lesson I don't regret learning," Katelyn dismissed. She quickly checked in the white flowers I had placed on the counter. "What color bag and ribbon do you prefer to put these flowers in?"

I thought about it, before I smirked knowingly. "Why don't you chose them for me? I still don't have enough knowledge on this sort of thing." Katelyn laughed.

Look at you, Seth, Hunter teased. Chatting up the nice girl like a damn pro. Better be careful not to give her mixed signals, Greek.

I have no idea what you are insinuating. There's nothing wrong with being polite.

All I got in response was Hunter laughing his ass off. I was about to question what he found so funny before my attention was forced elsewhere.

"Looks like I'm not the only one with a good memory," she joked before picking the same light blue plastic wrap and ribbon to put the tulips in. "You know, I never got your name last time..."

"Seth Hunter," I stated, and I offered my hand out of courtesy after she handed back my purchase. "You seem to be doing well here."

"I am," Katelyn replied. "I love working here. It's a shame I must quit soon." Noticing my confusion, she clarified, "I'm going to college next year."

"You're a senior?" I inquired. She nodded.

"I attend the local high school, Carrollton High," she said, before asking curiously, "Are you also a senior?"

I shook my head. "Junior."

"Which school do you attend?"
"None, I'm homeschooled."

"Homeschooled?" Katelyn said in surprise. "So, you've never attended a public school before?"

"I've shadowed one," I said honestly, finding no reason to lie. "It was...an interesting experience."

...an experience I DON'T want to repeat again.

"You should come visit Carrollton," Katelyn suggested, "the school has very nice facilities, and the architecture is beautiful. If you like, just give me a call and I could give you a tour."

I heard Hunter give an impressed whistle. Dang, this girl is smooth!

My silver eyes narrowed at Hunter's suggestive comment, and unknowingly made Katelyn back away, uncertain after seeing my frown. "I thank you for the kind offer, but that won't be necessary. I don't plan on attending any public institution before college."

"O-oh, okay," Katelyn muttered quietly, looking away from my stare. "That would be twenty seventy-nine…"

I paid for the flowers in cash, and after a couple more pleasantries, I waved good-bye after the mortal girl recommended me to check out their new website, and not so subtly, write them a good review. I promised her I would, and quickly checked them out on my mobile after getting into a cab.

While I scrolled through the website, Hunter spoke, you still don't have a clue what you just did, huh?

"I'm very sure I didn't do anything that warrants humor," I whispered, keeping my voice down. I kept my eyes on the taxi driver, who made a turn down another avenue. "Can you tell me what's going on now?"

You want the roundabout version, or do you prefer it straight up?

"Just tell me already," I said, feeling a tinge of impatience.

Straight up it is, Hunter said, and then he continued to say what had happened very bluntly: The girl was hitting on you.

My fingers stopped scrolling, surprise evident on my face. I traced back to my conversation with Katelyn, and what had happened whenever Hunter added his inputs. After reviewing the conversation again, my mind finally concluded that what the Roman told me was the truth, and not another attempt to rattle me. I stared down at my mobile, the boutique's website still glaring in my face until I quickly rated them as promised and closed the window, shoving the new phone into my pocket.

Why would she hit on me? I wondered, still puzzled. Did I do anything to suggest....?

Who knows? Maybe we're her type. I wouldn't blame her— when you TRY, we're quite the catch, Hunter said, and his narcissistic comment made me scowl.

"I did not dress to please, Hunter," I said, my jaw clenched tightly. "Today is a day of mourning, and Katelyn was well-aware of that this time."

That didn't stop her from ogling you, Hunter snickered. Did you see the way she blushed when you leaned over the counter to check if she was typing in the prices correctly? She was so conscious of
"I didn't notice."

Really? Not even when her hands lingered a bit TOO long over ours when she handed you the bags, which, by the way, we could have picked up ourselves?

His sharp observations were starting to make me uncomfortable. More importantly, he had brought up an alarming issue I needed to take care of. Remind me to visit a different flower boutique next time, Hunter. Preferably one that is closer to Greenwood Cemetery.

Hunter sounded amused. And you called ME a cold bastard, Mr. Kettle? The girl already said she was quitting, Seth. You don't have to change stores.

"It's not about the girl, Hunter," I muttered, staring at the window as the taxi drove past another row of houses. A red light forced the taxi to stop, allowing a pair of pedestrians to cross. "That store is already compromised by that witch."

You think SHE manipulated the mortal into liking you? Hunter asked. He sounded incredulous. Sheesh, your paranoia knows no bounds.

"What else could it be?" I replied. "Katelyn never showed an interest in me last time, so why would she do so now? This has her stink all over it."

I'm not too sure about that, Hunter said skeptically. Katelyn did mention how you left an 'impression', remember? I mean, come on! She remembered you even after a year! She must have already expressed an interest in you back then, but you didn't notice.

"Maybe," I consented, "but I'm going to avoid that store anyway." The taxi came to a halt in front of the cemetery gates. I stepped out into a frost-covered path after paying the driver. I quickly made my way around the tombstone until I found the right one. I was relieved to see a bunch of withered flowers that I didn't place last time; Lucy and her parents had come by. I wasn't alone.

I talked to that slab of onyx while I cleaned. Replacing the withered flowers with my fresh tulips, I quickly summarized what I had experienced with Walt and Lynetta, and my promise to get back at that goddess. I spoke of seeing Lucy, and how we had fun at the carnival. Then, I finally told them about Hunter.

"Do you want to say something, Hunter?" I asked him, who had been strangely silent the entire time I was cleaning. I thought he would add in his opinions.

No, Hunter muttered, tentative. I think you covered everything. There's nothing I want to say.

"How about a 'hello'?" I suggested. Hunter gave a snort.

I don't see the point of this, he grumbled. Why do you feel the need to inform everything that has happened to an inanimate object? We know better than to believe their spirits are floating around watching us. You're literally talking to a fancy block of stone.

His insensitivity should have made me angry, and if anyone other than Hunter was saying this to me, I would have immediately blown a fuse. After spending so much time with my counterpart, however, I have developed a better understanding of where Hunter was coming from, and why he'd think this conversation was meaningless.

"I don't expect you to understand," I murmured, staring at the reflective stone piece. There was a
mirrored image of me confined within its dark and glossy surface. The white lettering seemed to float about my penitent figure, making it harder to see myself. "It's been nearly three years since they died, Hunter. Three years is a long time. I know I should move on, and focus on my relationships with the living, not the dead that cannot talk back."

You know this, but you don't do it?

"I…I can't accept the way they died!" I said with clenched teeth, and I pounded both fists on the snow-covered ground, frustrated and angry. "It's different if they died from a natural fire-That bitch used them, Hunter! She used them to get to me, and then she used me to get at Artemis. It's all a game to her! She's willing to kill and sacrifice whoever she pleases just to make a goddamn point!

"I talk to them because I need to remember why I'm here," I uttered. "I come here to renew my focus, to strengthen my resolve to do what I must, to gain back my courage. I…I'm scared, Hunter," I admitted at last. "I'm scared that I'll be discovered. I'm scared of what the consequences will be. I'm afraid of what I will see in that abyss, and I'm scared of dying. More than that, I'm so afraid of finding out what our friends will do once they know! Will they prove themselves to be my true friends and give me the benefit of the doubt? Will they try to 'save' me like how Katie is doing with Clare? Or was I the only one who thought we had something meaningful?!"

"You fear rejection," Hestia claimed.

"Fear?" I had scoffed back. "I'm not scared of this! I've faced pain and death more times than I could count! That is something to fear!"

"Child," she had said quietly, and it was only now I recognized it as pity, "you are already taking steps in avoiding rejections. That is a sign of fear."

Hestia was right. Even back then, I always knew she was right, but my pride wouldn't allow me to admit it. I mean, rejection? How was someone turning their back to me worse than losing my life on a battlefield? Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me, right? Right?

…whoever came up with that saying must have been a cold-hearted son of a bitch.

My final exam revealed as much. My first test proved that I was afraid of death, still traumatized by my dive into the Mississippi River. The last revealed that I still held regrets over Lee and Zoë's deaths, but that second one? That test was the sickest one of all, and pushed my sanity to the brink. Being trapped in that glass case, now the star of a freak show, with Artemis and all my friends scorning me in their hearts, had me close to breaking down than anything I faced in real life. I still shivered every time I recalled the details, and my hand would unconsciously reach up to touch my throat.

I snapped out of it when Hunter said, So what?

"Huh?"

So what if they don't give you the benefit of the doubt? Hunter clarified. If they shit on you and turn their backs even after everything you've done for them, then they don't DESERVE your friendship.

"Hunter," I reasoned, "I'm about to 'betray' them; if they react badly then it's likely out of loyalty to Camp Half-Blood, and I'm just not-!"

You're not WHAT? Hunter demanded. Good enough? No, Seth, it means that so called friendship was baseless from the start. You're not even betraying them for real! If your friends are as great as you claim them to be, then I KNOW they will give you a chance to explain until we force them out of
it, and they WILL remain your friends when they eventually realize your sacrifices. They won't push you away.

"How are you so sure?" I asked, wondering where Hunter was getting his confidence from. "We've never experienced this before. Anything can happen."

"It's because YOU believe in them, Seth, Hunter pointed out. Do you think your judgment is so poor that you can't tell who your real friends are?"

"That's…" I faltered, not sure what to say. Hunter had got me good.

"It will be fine, Hunter reassured, YOU will be fine, Seth. Even if you end up hurt and everyone has turned their backs on you, I will be with you every step of the way. The reason I revealed myself is so I can HELP you! You won't need anyone else with ME around. So why don't you just chill and relax? I'm not ready to have white hair."

"Hunter," I said, touched. "I can't tell you how much that means to me. Thank you." Hunter sighed, and I could sense his melancholy, and it worried me. He was cheering me up, but the positivity didn't include him. He sounded so depressed; I had no idea what caused it, but I made a note to myself to find out.

"You're not alone, Seth, Hunter said, more quiet and subdued, repeating what he said to me the first time we officially met. They were also the words I've longed to hear all my life, and I had a feeling Hunter knew it too. Whatever faults we may have with each other, my feelings have not changed: you are my partner, and that means you are not weak. I work only with the best, and that's what you are, Seth. Don't ever doubt it."

His many reassurances warmed my heart, and I found myself smiling. Hunter had felt my unease, so he said exactly what needed to be said to cheer me up. It was times like these that I was glad to have Hunter by my side, to have someone who truly understood me and would stand by me. I wished Hunter was like this all the time- honest, optimistic, reliable, confident…we'd get along without a hitch if it were so.

Who are you, Hunter? I thought. Which side is the real you?

Hunter chuckled quietly. Is a side needed? Everything you've seen is ME. Is that so hard to comprehend?

"Are you sure you're not bipolar?" I asked suspiciously.

"People are complex creatures, Seth, Hunter answered. You can't expect them to fit a single trope- the world would be very boring otherwise."

"I'm not…" I stopped when my silver eyes spotted someone familiar. Without realizing, my hands furled into fists, and my ADHD-riddled brain of battle reflexes made me instinctively place one foot behind the other, making my figure smaller and angled in a way to minimize any openings.

Oh shit, Hunter thought when he realized where my eyes were looking.

She stood under the shadows of a large tree, the lower branches obscuring the top of her auburn hair, which was tied in a half pony tail. She wore a light beige colored petticoat, and had a silvery white scarf tucked in. Her hands were in her pockets, her legs clad with dark stockings and snow boots. Her youthful face belied her grave silver eyes, which seemed to always pierce my soul each time I saw them. She made no move to come closer even as our stares lingered.
Eventually, I broke away from her fixation, and took a few steps forward. My shoulders loosened, and the tension slowly slipped off. I dipped my head in greeting.

"I didn't expect to see you here," I said.

Artemis lowered her gaze before finally moving closer. Now, we were just a foot apart from each other. I realized that Artemis had chosen to look my age; sixteen years old. I was taller than her by an inch. Normally, she went for the young adult look or the twelve-year-old girl her hunters were accustomed to. Not somewhere in between. Briefly, I wondered what prompted her to do so.

"I wish to see you again," Artemis confessed, her blunt answer surprising me. "Lappy informed me of your success and plans. I thought I'd spend some time with you before you leave."

I nodded, but I couldn't help but be wary. "Is that all?"

"Yes," she said, "I simply want to spend some time with you, Seth. I will not go back on my word and convince you to change your mind."

_Seth?_ 

_What is it, Hunter?_ 

_I'm going to leave the two of you alone_, he said quietly.

I felt my panic levels rising. _W-Why? I'm sure she doesn't mind if you listen in._ 

_It's fine, Hunter dismissed, I won't intrude, and there are some things I need to go over on my own._ 

_Oh, uh, okay, I thought uneasily. Why did Hunter have to ditch me now? Are you sure though? Because I REALLY don't mind-_!

_Seth, Hunter interrupted, quickly picking up on my unease. You will be fine. Alright? Remember what you told Lynetta? Try to be patient. Let her explain what she wants. See it as another social outing, and you'll do great! There's no need to be nervous._

I released a breath I didn't know I holding in, and I felt a sense of tranquility wash over me. After I calmed down, I felt Hunter's presence disappear completely. His last-minute advice left me puzzled; I never knew Hunter could sound so gentle. It was so unlike his usual self that I had trouble believing it had happened. I wished he was like this more.

"Seth?" Artemis said, looking at me carefully. Her silver eyes looked concerned.

I sighed, focusing on who was in front of me. "I apologize, Lady Artemis, I was deep in thought. It was not my intention to ignore you." Aware of the awkward tension about to surface, I quickly asked, "Where's Lappy?"

"Lappy is with my hunters," she informed, "I asked him to watch over them while I'm gone."

"Oh," I said, suddenly feeling uneasy. It didn't help that Artemis was content with staring at me with this foreign look in her eye, and letting me lead the conversation. For once. "So, uh, it's just you here?"

She frowned, "Were you expecting someone else?"

_Shit, shit, SHIT!_ I did not mean that! Great Hera, since when did holding a conversation with Artemis become so difficult? I never had a problem instigating a conversa- wait. _Arguments_
and battle strategies didn't fall under good social conversation, did they? When was the last time I could look, much less speak, to Artemis in a positive light?

Not including the time Hunter spoke to Artemis, our exchanges were either short, one-sided, or explosive. Just a little over a year ago, Artemis and I weren't on speaking terms until she got captured and forcefully claimed me right in front of everyone. My identity had become a joke for others to laugh, criticize, and point fingers at. The memory still pained me every time I recalled it, and I quickly pushed it to the back of my mind, locked away in one of the many rooms I constructed with Hunter. I made a promise to myself to forget what happened after that Capture the Flag game, and I was going to keep it.

After Apollo revealed the truth, everything changed for the better and for the worse. I was made into a bigger fool, and I lost so many of my reasons to keep living. Any pride I had left was in tatters, and my sense of self-deprecation grew. Artemis' excuses didn't suffice, and I had been so tempted to leave that palace right after I said my piece until I realized Artemis' sincere regret in those last moments, and that was what convinced me to forgive her.

I still couldn't believe I managed to walk out of that debacle alive, and not transformed and thrown in her cage of wild jackalopes. The fact that I could stand beside Artemis respectfully a year later, and not wish vengeance upon her, was an accomplishment in and of itself.

I still struggled over what I wanted out of this 'relationship'. I've thought about cutting ties with Artemis after the war was over. I thought about leaving it estranged. I thought about keeping in touch once every five or ten years until I died. I thought about moving out of the country, just so I could escape this god-infested hub of Western civilization, ditching the whole mythological world. I considered trying to re-establish our 'familial' relationship, despite believing it wasn't possible, before I settled on mending our broken bonds. I'd let my doors creak open a bit, and leave it to Artemis to construct the bridge over the moat before meeting her halfway. We would pay our dues, and that would be the extent.

All I wanted was to remain in Artemis' good graces; that would be more than enough. I didn't know what Artemis wanted, but if she wanted more than what I could offer, it would be...problematic.

Wordlessly, Artemis lifted a hand and carefully linked her arm around mine. My body stiffened by instinct. I wasn't used to being held this way. Swallowing uncomfortably, my mind tried very hard not to linger on how she had twisted that arm the last time she got this close. Artemis must have sensed my discomfort, when her grip loosened.

Is this alright? Her eyes seemed to say. I was surprised that she'd bother to ask for my permission. Gradually, I relaxed and nodded, allowing Artemis to wrap her hand around the crook of my arm. She also lifted her other hand to touch my bicep, and when I made no move to avoid the contact, she did so.

"I'd like us to go somewhere together," she said. "If you are fine with it?"

"That's alright," I said softly. "Lead the way."

With a slight nudge, I allowed Artemis to guide me away from Greenwood Cemetery and into the busy streets of New York City. I had no idea where she planned to take me, and somehow, the uncertainty didn't frighten me. I felt oddly at peace as the two of us walked past mortals talking on phones or looking in at the store's display cases. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a young boy and his sister running about playfully, their small hands in the air to catch the falling bits of snow. The children ran past me and Artemis without a glance, their parents following closely.
I was so absorbed by what's around me, that I didn't notice Artemis had stopped. We were in front of a Starbucks. I looked at her dubiously. Artemis gave a sheepish smile in return.

"I thought you might like some coffee," she explained. "I heard this store is popular."

For a moment, I was tongue-tied; I wasn't used to Artemis being so considerate, and my skeptic mind didn't allow me to lower my guard. I did develop a taste for coffee while I trained under Walt and Lynetta. The extra caffeine in my system had helped me through the early mornings many times, and I had nothing against Starbucks. Did Artemis find out this tidbit about me from Walt?

We went in, the doors giving a soft *ding* to signify new customers. We waited in line for a few minutes before it was our turn. The aroma of crushed coffee beans made me sigh in pleasure. I could see why people preferred dining in. The male barista gave a welcoming smile, and asked us what we'd like.

I scanned the menu briskly. "I'll have a Grande caramel macchiato. Hot. With extra whip cream if you please."

"Okay," the barista said, filing my order into the register and without looking up, he asked, "what will your sister like?"

I started to babble, "I, uh, she…"

"I'll have the *Chocolate Marble Loaf Cake*," Artemis answered calmly, and the barista hurriedly typed in the order and gave me the numbered receipt.

Moments later, we were seated across each other at the corner with large lit windows, with our drink and cake placed on a circular table between us. Artemis had paid for them after whipping out some platinum credit card. I could still see the snow falling outside, forming bits of frost on the glass. I lifted my cup as I gently blew on it. The sweet aroma was pleasant and I closed my eyes as I sipped in the hot liquid, its contents quickly warming up my bundled body.

I placed the cup back down, and noticed that Artemis had taken off her beige coat, revealing a long silvery white sweater with a belt tied around her waist, her legs clad in black leggings. She looked so normal, like a high school girl on holiday, spending time with her identical twin at Starbucks. It goes without saying how misleading things could appear to be.

I still wondered what Artemis wanted from me. Why did she decide to take me out today? There were also some answers I wanted from her, but I was too hesitant to ask.

Thankfully, Artemis was the one to break the awkward atmosphere. "Congratulations on completing your training, Seth."

"Thank you," I accepted, only because it was right.

She nodded. "How are you, Seth? I'm aware that you've just returned from paying your respects."

"I'm fine," I said, a bit dismissive. It still made me uncomfortable whenever my late family was brought up. "I said what I came to say, and I'm glad I did."

"I see," she said, before she pushed the cake towards me. "This is also for you, if you want?"

"Oh," I blinked in surprise, "um, sure. I guess I can take it if you don't want it?" She shook her head. "Okay then." I always had a sweet tooth, and I was never one to deny free food. I promptly took the offered fork and started on my dessert. The warm chocolate melted in my mouth and made me see
heaven. Silence followed as I focused on finishing the offered treat. I was about halfway done when that silence ended:

"Happy Birthday, Seth Hunter."

My hand stilled, and I slowly swallowed down the lump of cake in my mouth. I saw Artemis smile pleasantly at me, her face appearing brighter than usual. Eventually, I recalled the date, and sighed, "It's not my birthday for another three weeks, Lady Artemis."

"I'm aware, but circumstances demand that we celebrate it now than on the Winter Solstice," she explained, still smiling. "After all, you will be turning sixteen this year, an age worth noting even in America- a Sweet Sixteen, I believe it was called?"

I scoffed lightly without malice. "Those 'sweet sixteens' are for girls, Lady Artemis."

She frowned, "I thought they were unisex?"

"I suppose guys can also have a 'sweet sixteen'," I amended, "but it's not as big a deal for us than it is for girls. Traditionally, girls would have this grand coming-of-age party where they dress up nice and invite all their friends and family to celebrate. For guys though, what matters is the driver's license. We generally don't care for the frills and formal gatherings."

"I see," Artemis muttered, her brows narrowing in thought. "It appears that there are still some mortal customs I've yet to be fully knowledgeable in."

"At least you're trying," I pointed out, taking another bite of my cake. That was a lot more than I could say for most gods. "Is this why you decided to come see me? To celebrate my birthday early?"

She nodded, "Yes, but I also wanted to see how you were doing, as well as…discuss."

Placing my fork down, I lifted a napkin and wiped the remaining crumps off my face before giving Artemis my full attention. "What do you want to discuss about, ma'am?" Artemis flinched.

"Do you still resent me, Seth?" she asked quietly.

I thought about it. "I…I don't think so. I have trouble trusting you, but…I don't resent you anymore." I looked at her curiously. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you continue to deny me as your parent," Artemis said, and I couldn't help but notice how sad her silver eyes appeared to be. "Unlike your Roman counterpart, you've never addressed me as your mother. I know I've caused you a lot of pain, Seth, and I've done things out of my own pride that I wished I hadn't. At first, I thought you still harbor ill feelings towards me despite our reconciliation and you're trying to spite me, but now that you've claimed otherwise…"

"You're at a loss on why I don't call you mother like Hunter does?" I finished. She nodded curtly.

"I'd like to hear your reasons," Artemis said softly, folding her hands in front of her in anticipation, "and please, don't hold back. I won't smite you if you happen to offend me."

"That also includes not turning me into a jackalope, right?"

"Yes."

I smiled uneasily, but I knew Artemis meant it. After all, she had enough mercy to let me leave her palace in one piece after my long rant. I really should have expected this to come up- I knew Artemis
was uncomfortable with the way I currently addressed her. I wasn't blind, and I only put it off because I didn't know how she would take it if I told her why. I knew she didn't like being treated the same way as I treat other gods I respected. She felt like she deserved some special recognition from me simply because I was her creation, and was she was wrong to feel that way? She wasn't, but I didn't think it was right either.

I thought about what I was about to say before I began, "Artemis, how would you feel if I called you my mother?"

"I'd be very happy," she said honestly.

"Why?"

"Why?" she echoed, puzzled. "Is there a why?"

"Yes," I muttered quietly, looking down at my coffee, "there should be a why. If you can tell me your why, then I'll tell you why I don't call you what you wish to hear. If you don't have one and treat it like it's a given...then I'm afraid you won't understand."

"You're sure about that?" she questioned, and I nodded firmly. "Very well, Seth. I'd be happy because you're my only child, and a child ought to demonstrate care and affection towards his or her parent because they would know that said parent will provide for them and protect them from harm. If you called me your mother, then it would mean that you'd feel the same way as the child I described and I would be honored to receive those feelings from you, especially after everything we've been through."

"Does that satisfy your inquiry?" she asked.

"It would suffice," I murmured, looking up, "but I can't help but notice: you say 'child' instead of son or daughter. Does it not matter to you if the child isn't of the same flesh?"

"It does not," she answered, "aside from you, I also strive to be a surrogate mother for my hunters."

"What do you do to suggest that?" I wondered.

"By being available," she said simply. "I make sure that I am there to answer any of their concerns. I make sure that each of my hunters is well-provided and make sure to protect them from harm. I still recall the names of every hunter I've ever recruited, including the ones who have been led astray. I know their likes and dislikes, their fears and ambitions. Each of them have their unique personality that I still find refreshing. They are loyal to me, and I find it easy to confide in them matters I cannot express to others."

"That's quite thoughtful of you," I whispered. "You must care about your hunters a lot, Artemis, to willingly mingle in the mortal world instead of Olympus for your hunters. I see Thalia's words to be true: you really are different from most gods I've met."

Artemis smiled, "I'm pleased to hear you say that."

"I say it because it is true," I dismissed, taking another sip of coffee. "Artemis, I don't know how else to phrase this but...the way you treat your hunters is one of the reasons why I don't acknowledge you."

I watched silently as her smile disappeared, her good demeanor replaced with confusion and alarm. She didn't expect this answer.
"Explain," she said at last.

"It's not because I'm jealous," I clarified, feeling the need to get that out. "I think it's great to witness the lengths you would go for your hunters. I know you care for them, love them like they are your own daughters. Some of them have been with you for centuries, and have fought and bled for your sake. I completely understand why you do what you do for them and I don't begrudge you for that.

"Do you remember how we got into this mess in the first place?" I reminded her. "One of your hunters got caught by that giant, and he made you choose between your hunter and the orphanage. Between the two, the choice is made obvious to me now, but looking back…the real choice was between your hunters and me, and you chose your hunters. You chose to let them in on your deception. You chose to keep me a secret because you valued their opinions of you more than being seen with me, one of those males you dislike, in public-!"

"It's not like that!" she said sharply, her silver eyes flashing dangerously. Seeing her so riled up suddenly reminded me exactly how precarious my situation was. "It's not like that, Seth," she said, more softly this time, but the damage was already done. I quickly realized that not even Zoë dared to speak against Artemis like this. "I couldn't be seen with you because the laws require us not to involve ourselves with mortals longer than necessary, and I didn't want anyone to know that I broke that law when I chose to stay with you for a week. It wasn't out of shame."

"You're right," I quickly agreed, "I only thought about that way at the time, before I got to know your side of the story. I've been told I could be very presumptuous, so I misspoke." I quickly made a note to myself never to let my mouth run off like that again. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"Your hands are shaking," Artemis said quietly.

"I'm cold," I said briskly, instinctively placing my hands under the table and mentally slapping myself for doing it. "There's a little wind seeping in from the window..."

"You're wearing a coat and scarf," she pointed out.

"So? That doesn't mean I won't feel it." Artemis sighed.

"Seth, I'm not angry at you," she replied, "I didn't mean to snap at you like that, but I was compelled to make sure you know my real intentions sooner than later."

I nodded numbly, feeling my body start to calm down. I lifted hands back up to hold onto my cup, taking comfort from its warmth. "Okay."

"I mean it," Artemis insisted, "you don't ever need to feel afraid of me, Seth."

"But that's the thing," I replied, "I am afraid of you, Artemis, and I have no idea when I would stop being afraid. Try to picture yourself in my shoes for a little while – you are a mortal, casually living out your life like everyone else, when suddenly, your maker decided to reveal herself and inform you that you aren't as mortal as you believe, and everything you believe to be yours is determined by said maker. You would likely feel curious, intimidated, but also very privileged to get to know your maker on a personal level. But then you and your maker suddenly have a fall-out, and the one being that has control over your life has become your enemy, and has the power to snuff out your life any day she wants. Even after you and your maker have reconciled, your experiences has allowed you to see your boundaries clearly, and if you desire to keep living, then it is best to keep away from the edge.

"You still have that power, Lady Artemis," I whispered. "This relationship we have, it's unbalanced.
The ball will always remain in your court, and it is you making the decisions. Whether we get along or go back to ignoring each other, in the end, it is up to you. I may choose not to comply with your wishes, but you can always force me to do what you want; you just choose not to."

"So," Artemis said tightly, "you believe that if you were to offend me again, then you'd be risking your life?"

"Yes," I answered solemnly, "and this belief is shared: Every demigod is going through the same circumstances. Lord Zeus once claimed that demigods served as the bridge between gods and mortals, and it is through them that your will could be enacted. However, if demigods are your go-between between you and mankind, then who is our go-between with you? Who serves as the demigods' mediator? The answer is no one, and that knowledge is enough to make me and all demigods recognize our place."

"And what is your 'place'?"

"Tools," I said bluntly. "I know you're aware of this, Lady Artemis- so I won't bore you with the details. You are one of the Olympians, a master of many realms, and each of those realms require a work force. Like a corporate CEO, you may show favor to assistants who do you good service and reward them with promotions and gifts. However, if you have employees who have lost your favor and work poorly, then you would, naturally, fire them."

"Is this analogy your way of explaining why you don't acknowledge me as you should?" Artemis said tensely, her silver eyes not leaving mine. "That the reason why you acknowledge me only on a professional level is because you see our relationship as nothing more than master and servant?"

When I remained silent, thus confirming her suspicions, her eyes narrowed. "What if I don't approve?"

"Of what?"

"Of the way you address me," she specified, "or how you seem to rely on my brother and that minor goddess more than you do with me?"

So, she did know of my pact with Nemesis, I thought, but does she know why I did it? This was troubling.

"I suppose I could minimize my reliance on Lord Apollo and Lady Nemesis," I muttered. "That way, I won't be favoring them over you. It'll be difficult, but Lappy has always been helpful, and there's Chiron and Thalia and Percy…!" I broke off suddenly when Artemis reached over to wrap her hands around mine. "A-Artemis…?"

"You stubborn child," Artemis mumbled in Ancient Greek, shaking her head. "What I want is to have you rely on me more, Seth, not minimize contact with my brother and risk getting into trouble where I can't see you."

Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, I thought humorlessly. She also pointedly didn't mention Nemesis. Great.

"Your analogy has merit," she admitted, letting go of my hands. "I've seen it happen many times with my own eyes, and we know this cycle is unlikely to change, but you and I are different, Seth. You're not just one of many children I've sired nor am I one of those goddesses who only care for casual flings or having more children to gain influence. You are not a mere demigod whose face I will forget years down the line- you are my sole heir. Do you understand the difference between being an heir and being another son or daughter of a god, Seth?"
"I…haven't given it much thought," I said honestly. "Using my analogy, the heir would be the one to inherit the company. They are usually the eldest or only child of the owner, and they are tasked with understanding how the company works so the transition of power will be smooth and quick…" I faltered, suddenly struck with an overwhelming revelation. "A-are you saying that I'll be the one to…?"

She nodded, giving a soft smile. "Not many of us have declared an heir, Seth, because we cannot imagine ourselves no longer existing in the future. However, as the world grows more secular and their belief in gods grows dim…we would eventually fade. When that time comes, the god's appointed heir would take up the mantle and continue our legacy."

"B-but that can't be!" I argued, slightly panicking by the responsibilities stacking on top of me. "I… I'm a guy, Artemis, and your hunters-!"

"Relax, Seth," Artemis said coolly, "that time has yet to pass, and I dare say it will not come for at least another millennium. There's no need for you to fret, but I'm relieved to see you finally understand just how significant you are to me."

"Lady Artemis," I said quietly, "what happens if a god's chosen heir were to die prematurely? Wouldn't they choose another as a replacement?"

"No," she said adamantly. "Once a god has decided which child would be their heir, the choice is permanent. If the heir were to die before they could perform their duty, then the god would be left heirless."

"Then, it would make sense if the child chosen was also an immortal?"

"Not necessarily," she answered. "Asclepius, the god of medicine, is my brother's heir. He was born a mortal before he was made a god." **

"Asclepius," I repeated, trying to recall his myths. "Wasn't he struck by a thunderbolt from Lord Zeus and killed for reviving the dead?"

"He was," she said, "and my brother, naturally, was furious that our father killed his heir. He even went and killed our father's cyclopes in revenge, and was sentenced a year of serving as a mortal cowherder." She smiled fondly at the memory. "He was very good at his job."

"But in the end, Asclepius was made an immortal to fulfill his duties," I pointed out. "I…I'm a mortal, Artemis. I don't expect to live forever, and I honestly don't know if I want to."

Artemis looked curious. "I always thought mortals envied us for our immortality, but there would always be a couple who would reject the offer when given. Would you care to explain why they would refuse?"

"I think it comes down to a person's purpose in life," I said carefully. "If that purpose would remain fulfilling or profit from limitless time, then I believe they would be more inclined to agree. If their purpose is short-term, or would cease to matter in later years, then they would decline."

"What would be a short-term purpose?" she asked.

I shrugged, "Love, I guess. If a man was offered immortality, but his lover was not given the same opportunity, then he would decline if his purpose is to love and cherish her. If that wasn't his purpose, then he would accept, eventually get over his lover's death by old age, and move on with a new lover."
"And is that your reason, Seth?" Artemis said coyly. I felt my face heat up at the suggestion. "Is there someone you like? I won't judge if you decide to pursue a relationship, but I would like to inter-meet whoever it is that has caught your eye."

I shook my head, uncomfortable by her curiosity. "There's no one."

"No one?" she echoed, sounding a bit more shocked than I expected. I nodded slowly. "Is this by choice or is there no one interested in you?"

"Both," I said tightly, taking a quick sip of my coffee, which has turned lukewarm, "I don't want to talk about it."

Artemis looked like she wanted to say more, but thankfully, decided against it. "Alright, but if you ever decide otherwise…"

"Yeah, sure, I'll let you meet them," I muttered, not really caring since it wouldn't happen. "I thought you would be against it."

"Normally, I would," she admitted, "but for you, your happiness comes first, Seth. If that happiness lies with being together with your significant other, then I won't object, given that they pass my standards."

I couldn't help but smile at the idea of Artemis conjuring a list of schemes to drive off my nonexistent love interest, because that was something she would do. "Your consideration is appreciated, but I wouldn't spend too much time on those standards of yours."

Artemis nodded, "Then what is your reason for rejecting immortality, Seth, if not for love?"

"It is still out of love," I corrected, "but it is not the kind of love between lovers. Everything that I do is for my close friends and family, Artemis. They are my purpose in life, and they cannot be replaced. I don't want to outlive them, and then someday, attend their funerals and mourn their passing."

I sighed, feeling a little depressed at the thought. "I know this is selfish of me, because I would be doing the same thing to you and Thalia, and I'd be leaving you heirless, but this is the reason why I would rather live a mortal life."

She looked thoughtful. "You care a lot for your friends."

I nodded, feeling my face flush from her concerned gaze. "I do."

"Are they also the reason why you chose to defy me and go undercover?"

"Technically, it's because of my prophecy, but being able to help my allies and friends in ways that they can't has allowed me accept my given role more easily."

"Even if it means letting them hate you?" she said softly.

I swallowed, "even if it comes down to that." Artemis nodded, deep in thought, before she asked another unexpected question.

"Seth, do you think you're a good person?" Artemis inquired. "A good man?"

"I don't think I can judge that," I answered honestly, "what's good and what's evil is always subjective and tainted by our biases and environment; One man's freedom fighter could be another man's terrorist."
"A wise answer," Artemis smiled, and her eyes seem to brighten up, "and one I agree wholeheartedly. You've become quite a mature individual, Seth, just as I expect from you."

Again, I looked down in embarrassment, my cheeks warm. "I'm pleased to hear that."

"Do you know that I once believed males are incapable of being good?" she said, her silver eyes downcast as she glanced at the bright window. The snow has stopped falling. "I thought they were selfish, arrogant, callous, and ambitious things— I didn't see them as human beings and I viewed them worse than I do animals."

"I've slowly realized how flawed I was in believing that," she whispered, "but when you're surrounded by males who didn't know the meaning of self-restraint and virtue, and abuse their entitlement to get what they want— you wouldn't think it was wrong."

I nodded, but I didn't quite agree with her last statement. From what I read, all the Olympians, male and female, have committed their share of injustice. None of them were guiltless, except Hestia, maybe. There weren't that many myths written down about her, so her 'innocence' could still be up for debate; but only the cynical part of me believed that.

I didn't voice this opposition aloud though. Despite her reassurances, I didn't want to risk her getting angry and changing her opinion of me. This relationship was unbalanced, I reminded myself. It always amazed me how I was still sitting here alive after all the reckless and dumb shit I did in the past, and I wasn't going to repeat those mistakes.

"Why do I stay in the mortal world in my spare time than go back to Olympus?" Artemis continued, repeating my earlier question. "It's not only because of my Hunters, Seth, but to also increase my chances of meeting another mortal man who has proven himself a rare exception. Discovering these few good men gives me hope that there is still light in places I believed dark. I've witnessed more honor and devotion in a man than I have ever seen in a god during these last few centuries. Your friend, Percy Jackson, is also one of these exceptions." ***

I nodded eagerly, smiling. Now that sentiment was something we shared. "Percy's a great person, Artemis. I'm thankful to have him as my friend."

…which makes it even more painful when he realizes my 'betrayal', I thought morbidly.

"I know," she said calmly, "and I'm happy for you. Of course, I don't go out of my way of seeking out these exceptions. There are always more rotten apples than good apples, and I'd punish them accordingly, but now…I believe all this searching can come to an end."

Puzzled, I decided to voice my confusion, "why would you stop?"

"Because the good man I've been looking for is sitting right in front of me," she said simply.

My face paled, and I was sure my mouth was wide enough to catch flies. My mind was reeling over what she said, and I could feel tremors throughout my body as memories, ones I wished to forget, flashed before my eyes. She…she thought I was good?

Overwhelmed by what this entailed, I accidentally spilled my remaining Caramel Macchiato when I stood up abruptly and walked past a startled Artemis, who looked perplexed by my outburst, before she quickly followed suit. The cold, winter air whipped at my face when I pushed open the doors and walked down the New York City streets. It was darker outside, and snow began to drift down once more. I didn't get very far when I felt Artemis grasp my hand, effectively halting my hurried
"Seth, what's wrong?" she asked, looking more panicked than I've ever seen her, and now that I knew what she thought of me, the sight made my heart clench. "Child…!"

"I can't do it!" I exclaimed, tugging my hand from hers in favor of raising them up and furiously waving them sideways to emphasize the point. "It's already been so hard for me, Artemis, and now you've made it even more impossible than it was to begin with!"

"What are you talking about, Seth?" I heard her say. I turned my back to her, my eyes squeezed shut as my breaths came out fast and uneven.

"Y-you can't use me as a representative," I said shakily. "You can't claim that I'm a good man from everything you've seen from me, not when my own thoughts and goals are anything but. I…I'm not a good person, Artemis. I wish I was, but I'm not. I've killed people, people who deserved to live and experience those chances I was mercifully given. I've took the law into my own hands, forced others to do what they don't want to, and I…I've ridiculed and bullied people who didn't deserve it."

"Seth," I heard her say quietly, "I know of what you've done, but those actions were done in the past and by your counterpart-!"

"No," I interrupted, "I'm not going to let you shift the blame to Hunter, Artemis. No matter how much of an asshole he is, he doesn't deserve that. I made him for who he is, and it's hardly his fault if I was the one to influence his way of thinking. Also, while it wasn't me committing those horrible deeds, I never stopped him. It wasn't a question of power- I could easily take over or at least try to convince Hunter out of it, but I chose not to."

"It…felt so good getting back at those mortal drug dealers," I confessed, giving a shaky laugh. "Just seeing them burn in that warehouse, knowing full well that I was going to get away with it, it felt so satisfying! After what they've done to Lucy, I knew they will get sentenced to the Fields of Punishment, and I didn't regret it. Even now, the thought brings me so much happiness that it makes me sick."

"I felt the same way about the monsters. I saw them as this immortal force that needed reminding of what true fear was. That's why, I allowed Hunter to do what he wanted while I sat back and watched. Lappy still believes the best of me, you know? He thinks that all this negativity came from stress and he blamed Hunter for everything. I didn't correct him, I mean, why would I? I've got a convenient scapegoat to fulfill all my sinful desires, and my morality is left uncompromised, or so I thought."

"Hunter…he started to get greedy, and more violent," I said, wrapping my arms around my trembling frame, "I was afraid that I was starting to lose control of him, so I more or less enforced some rules for him to follow. Not so that he'd be good, but that he'd be more careful and not get us caught. Then, he killed that augur, Octavian, for a gaudy spear that didn't even belong to us, which I also consented to stealing. Shortly after that, he killed another- this time a Roman legacy barely in his preteens."

"He was only a child, Artemis," I said, my hitched voice filled with sorrow and regret, "and Hunter didn't care. He felt no remorse, confident that what he did was the right thing to do, something along the lines of securing our safety and upcoming role or whatever excuse he had! Predictably, we fought, but we didn't get anywhere with that. Hunter became very angry at me; he saw right through my lies and hypocrisy and probably felt betrayed for being used like that. He didn't speak to me for a while, and when he finally did, it was to save me during my final exam. He had forgiven me, could you believe it? I've hurt him so badly during our fight, and then he comes right back without
expecting an apology.

"I've accused Hunter of being a manipulative bastard, when I'm exactly like him! I manipulated Hunter into doing what I wanted to do by guilt-tripping him and dangling my support around him like a carrot tied to a stick, and never actually giving him the full support he craves. I knew that if I gave it to him, then I wouldn't have the upper hand anymore. Hunter wouldn't listen to me, and then, he'd break that 'good guy' image I spent years perfecting, and it must have held very well if I managed to fool you too, Artemis."

I felt my breath hitch, and the pending emotions I've built up came crashing down. My pricked eyes started to water, my nose clogging up with snot and germs. For the first time in a long while, I was... crying. I was crying over this terribly late and poor excuse of a confession, and once again, these feelings were enacted for me. I've held back the day Artemis deceived me and when St. Clair's burned to the ground, and I did so again when Zoë died. I also didn't shed any tears when I was informed of Lee's death or during his funeral. How could I be so callous as to show less empathy for them than for myself?

I... really am the worst, I realized, closing my eyes as tears continued to flow. I mustered a breath, my back still facing Artemis, who stood behind me in silence. I wondered what she's thinking; was this pitiful display what she expected out of me? Or maybe, she's making that 'Oh-shit, I've-made-a-mistake!' face, and she would take back what she thought of me. I wouldn't blame her if she did, but there was one final thing I still needed to get off my chest.

"Mothers..." I began with difficulty, "...ought to be...proud of their children. Y-you've shown me so much mercy and forgiveness despite my wretchedness, and I...I couldn't even return the favor. I-I keep disappointing you, and I want to say...say that I'm sorry. I've never apologized for all the pain I've caused you back then, and I'm sorry it took me this long to realize it now. It doesn't matter if it was out of ignorance or not- I still hurt you. For that, I...I promise I'll try to be b-better and become the child and heir you dreamed of having, and if I ever do become that person...I-I promise that I'll acknowledge you. Until then...I hope you'd wait for me, but I won't force you to.

"So, Artemis," I said quietly, my throat dry and raspy from talking so much. Thankfully, my tears have stopped flowing and I've lost the stutter, but my face remained a mess. I refused to face her directly, also afraid of what I would see. "You've been quiet for a while. Do you still think I'm 'a good man' after learning all that? You may think I've changed since we reconciled, but I'm telling you that I've only progressively gotten worse, and I may do even more despicable things in the future. Your 'good man' is not me, Artemis. On the other hand, Percy Jackson is a far better candidate for that position, and I am confident that he would accomplish great and morally good things. I could only hope that I'd be there to witness it and become the best support he could ask for. Percy would be the one to restore your faith in men. You'd only need to watch and let the Fates roll their string."

I lifted my head, my silver eyes looking up at that grey ominous sky, drops of snow falling against my bare skin. The tall skyscrapers of New York City loomed over me, making me feel small. Patiently, I waited with dread for Artemis' answer. I've already conjured up a couple possible scenarios. One involved Artemis not saying a word and leaving me behind quietly. Another had her agreeing with my suggestions, maybe accept my half-assed apology, and then never speaking to me again. The other possibilities weren't any better, and I steeled my heart when Artemis finally spoke.

"Percy Jackson is a good man," she whispered, "and I agree that, holistically, he does hold values and traits I find in conjunction with my ideal, and he will accomplish many remarkable things. My unclePoseidon is indeed lucky to have sired such a son."
I nodded numbly, her answers following one of many scripts I have made in my head. Now, it's only a matter of whether she followed path A or path B – will she accept my apology even with my back still facing her? Or would she reject it or say nothing at all?

I panicked when I heard Artemis move from her spot. Was she leaving after all? Was this it? Was I going to get left behind…again? I felt my eyes welling up once more, and my legs wanted to buckle and collapse, feeling despair. What was I thinking? Risking so much when the odds were stacked against me…!

A pair of warm arms wrapped around my waist, and my bare back was pressed against her warmth. She pressed her cheek against my right shoulder, and my breath hitched when her hold around me tightened enough to keep me from falling, but not so much as to inhibit my air intake.

When I tried to turn my face, Artemis objected, "Don't turn around, Seth. Just…listen to what I'm about to say." I complied, not knowing what to think. Later, however, I would realize that Artemis had did this for the sake of letting me keep my pride and dignity.

"You seem to be under the misimpression that what I want is a perfect child," she said closely against my ear. I shivered from the proximity. "You believe, that I want a child who would follow in my footsteps, obey me without a fuss, be able to join my hunters and I and fight honorable battles to win glory in my name. You believe that I want a daughter, and that as a male, you have already lost my favor, and because of our 'fall-out' you now believe you're teetering near the edge, and I'd kill you if you offended me in the slightest. Am I correct in assuming this?"

I didn't answer, my face was burning and my instincts were urging me to bolt and escape, but I couldn't. Not with Artemis holding me like this. She didn't loosen her arms at all, afraid that I'd slip out of her grasp. I didn't know how I should feel about that.

I suppose my silence was enough of an answer when she continued, "Seth, I do not care for perfection. I am not like my stepmother, who only cares for her 'perfect families'. It also doesn't matter to me if you chose to follow in my footsteps or not, and while I appreciate loyalty and honor, I do not require absolute obedience. What I want is a child, Seth, not a machine.

"It's true that I wanted a daughter at first," she said, "I believe having a daughter would make things easier. She'd be more accustomed to my lifestyle and have the right to lead my Hunters. My Hunters would also feel more inclined to welcome her as their newest sister and lieutenant, and everyone else would expect it so.

"Instead, I have you – the most aggravating, stubborn, and conflicting young man I've ever met in my life," she proclaimed, causing me to wince and lower my face. "You disobey orders, you go off on your own and come back with injuries that result from poor decision making, you go behind my back and make pacts with shady goddesses, and you remind me so much of myself that I can't help but care for you all the same. You've changed me, Seth, and I can no longer say this change is a terrible thing.

"I still think you are a good man, Seth," she said at last. "I know you are good because you have a conscious. You've demonstrated remorse and regret and sorrow over what you've done wrong many times, and you had the courage to admit them to me, someone you fear and distrust. I can't imagine how hard it was for you to tell me this, dear child, and I'm very happy you chose to confide in me."

She snuggled against my back some more, her hands feeling my sides slowly. I was blushing madly, and suddenly very thankful Artemis chose not to see my face. I wasn't used to this…this affection, and the feeling left me very troubled: A part of me wanted her to stop touching me, while another part of me didn't want her to. I heard her sigh contently as she pressed her face against my covered
neck. Then, she lifted a hand to entangle her fingers in my hair, suddenly turning my head, and I gasped when she kissed my tear-stained cheek.

I thought I heard a volcano erupting when I stumbled forward in a panic, only to get caught in her hold again. "W-why…?"

"I haven't embraced you like this since you were a baby," she said ruefully, hugging me. "Forgive me for my indulgence, child. I wanted to make up for lost time. Do you…not like it when I hold you?"

I don't ever want her near me!

Back then, I had been so consumed by my rage that I ended up pushing away not only Artemis, but anyone else who wanted to get close to me. Maybe that was when I started to get touch-sensitive, minimizing body contact as much as possible. I had even slapped her hand away, when she was likely trying to reach over and comfort me. I closed my eyes, and shook my head out of it, and sighed.

I still had a long way to go.

"I-If you want to continue, holding me like this, then you may," I said quietly, "I…I don't mind it, b-but no, um…" Sheepishly, I pointed at my cheek.

Artemis understood. "Ah, I see, but I can hold you as long as I want?" She sounded so hopeful and happy that I found it hard to refuse her. When I nodded back, I could imagine her smiling as she placed her chin on my shoulder, her auburn hair pressed against mine.

"I'll wait for you," she whispered, causing me to hitch a breath, "when you feel ready to acknowledge me…I'll look forward to that day, my dear hunter."

I nodded, and as I stood there in the middle of New York's many streets, and felt that rare sense of peace in her arms, I looked up at the sky again, and smiled.

I guess you were right…Hestia.

-End of Part 3-

Chapter End Notes

*Walt's backstory will be revealed in the final part. He and Lynetta will show up again as supporting characters.
**Asclepius is known to be Apollo's favorite son. He was a demigod with exceptional healing skills before he was revived from the dead and made the god of medicine (and doctors). I figured it would make sense if he was Apollo's chosen heir, given how much Apollo cared enough about him to take revenge.
***There are myths in which Artemis showed favor to men. One notable example is Hippolytus, son of Theseus, a strong follower of Artemis who scorned Aphrodite by vowing never to give up his chastity. It's also rumored that after Hippolytus died in a scheme conjured by Aphrodite (what a surprise), Artemis asked Asclepius to revive Hippolytus from the dead, therefore starting that whole mess I mentioned in the story. It is also canon that Artemis shows favor to Percy Jackson after he took the sky from her,
and how she is more knowledgeable in mortal matters than most of her brethren. I took that canon fact a bit further and developed it to suit my plot.

A/N: Please leave a comment! I normally don't ask for them, but since this is the last chapter of the story I would appreciate some feedback on what you liked, disliked, or hope to see more of. Also, if you comment, please tell me what is your favorite part(s) from the story thus. I'm very curious to read what you guys think.

Thank you all for reading and I hope you decide to support the upcoming sequel. Be sure to bookmark the series so you don't miss it!

Imaginexwriter9
Sequel Notice

The final sequel is now up!

When the Moon Rises

Summary: AU Surrounded by enemies both mortal and divine, Seth Hunter goes behind the scenes of the second Titan War. Facing danger and death at every curb, the heir of Artemis soon learns that honor is a small price to pay...

Rating: T, but can also be borderline M in some chapters that are still in the works (for possible violence and psychological content)

Main Characters: Seth/Hunter, Artemis, Percy Jackson, Will Solace, Annabeth Chase, Clare Evergreen (she will be playing a bigger role in this last part)


Genre: Suspense, Adventure, Family, Psychological (I wish they added this tag), Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Friendship

I decided to give out a couple hints as to what you guys can expect in the upcoming plot:

1. Whatever you think you know about Hunter, be sure to take it with a grain of salt.

2. A character I mentioned in passing in this story will play a critical role.

3. Percy WILL NOT obtain the Achilles Curse. I personally never liked that Deus Ex Machina move Riordan pulled in TLO, and I believe Riordan realized it too when he conveniently got rid of the Curse later on in SON. Percy will still become powerful, but he will grow stronger by other means.

4. The Heroes of Olympus series will take place. I know some of you have asked to read how Seth's meetings with the remaining Seven (e.g. Leo, Piper, Hazel, and Frank) would go, and I will try my best to write them as canonically as possible while staying true to Seth's character.

A/N: A reviewer from fanfiction requested that I write out a list of Seth Hunter's abilities and stats, and I decided to heed that advice. Below, I have Seth's powers categorized and graded. The grades are in comparison to other demigods (not gods) and it is by my own flawed assessments (especially if it concerns canon demigods). Keep in mind that the difference between an A+ and an A- is quite significant for this list, and these grades are not set in stone. They can still go up or down depending on what situations I place my character through.

SETH HUNTER’S SKILLS, POWERS, AND CAPABILITIES LIST

PHYSICAL CAPABILITIES (A+) – Not including the gods, Seth Hunter has the overall best physical capabilities, which exceeds that of the Big Three's children, who would be graded with an A (Thalia, Jason, and Percy) or A- (Bianca and Nico; as of right now). This category is where most of Seth's abilities fall under, and where he excels best. However, if Seth is fighting over water, his capabilities goes down to an E (I say E and not F since I doubt every...
enemy would want to get close to someone puking his guts out :/).

**Enhanced Senses**

**Eyesight:** 20/8 during the day while his night vision is even sharper (he can see his targets in the dark as far as 50 meters away); children of Apollo have better eyesight than Seth during the day.

**Hearing:** Seth can clearly hear a person's heartbeat as far as a meter away.

**Poison detection by taste and smell**

**Trap detection by sight and touch**

**Enhanced Endurance and Stamina** - Seth Hunter can continue fighting without rest for at least an entire day (as shown during the Wolf House chapter); he has high pain tolerance and can outlast almost all other combatants (even children of the Big Three) if they are in the same physical conditions (e.g. having no food or rest).

**Enhanced Agility and Strength** - Seth Hunter is able to move faster than the average demigod, and be able to leap up very high and over certain distances that are impossible for mortals. As mentioned in the previous sequels, Seth is able to scale the Climbing Wall at CHB and leap and run across difficult terrain with ease. His agility allows him ample time to recover and get back up (if needed) and respond quickly. He also possesses great balance and almost cat-like reflexes in which he can maneuver his body in mid-air to lessen or avoid damage/collision and land on his feet from great heights.

**Enhanced Recovery and Regeneration**

**Strong Immunity System**

**Poison Immunity** – Seth's body can heal from a wide variety of poisons, but his first exposure to the poison will not heal as fast and cause pain.

**Immunity against illnesses** – Seth cannot get sick unless he is very deprived of energy; this does not include seasickness (Poseidon's limiter).

Without ambrosia, he can heal most wounds in less than thirty minutes, minor wounds (cuts and bruises) in ten; With ambrosia, the healing time is reduced by half.

**Weaknesses**

- Cannot regenerate new limbs (e.g. if Seth were to lose a finger, then his finger will not grow back).

- Cannot regenerate the amount of blood lost; when this occurs, Seth will experience fatigue and have slower reflexes.

Must be awake to heal fast. If he were in a coma, then his healing (especially for internal injuries) slows down. Seth's brain handles the healing, which makes him weak against continuous attacks because his mind is focused on something else.

**Celestial Silver Body**

His blood, being celestial silver, is extremely toxic against werewolves, and can act as a poison against most monsters. However, some monsters who use magic and allures, such as lamia and empousai, are immune to this toxicity and instead are highly attracted to Seth’s unique blood. The
reason why they are immune is because any kind of celestial metal is created through a god’s blessing, a form of magical enhancement or charm, to say bluntly.

**Olympian Athlete** - Seth Hunter has a natural affinity with projectiles, and this affinity extends to sports. His personal favorite sport is baseball, but he can also play well in basketball, tennis, badminton, volleyball, lacrosse, and any sport involving a lot of throwing and tossing by hand or equipment. Children of Apollo also have the potential to share this affinity.

**ADHD Battle Reflexes**

**COMBAT SKILLS (A-)** – Seth would be considered a mid-weight class fighter who relies on speed and accuracy. He has a wide range of styles, but he would be in trouble against a heavier and more durable opponent or someone who has an equal balance of power, speed, and strength (e.g. Lycaon).

**Master:** Karate, Tae Kwon Do, Muay Thai, and Capoeira (these styles share many commonalities and include kicks and strengthening the body for better balance, speed, and flexibility; Seth prefers fighting with his legs than his hands since they're normally occupied with weapons)

**Expert:** Wrestling and Martial Arts

**Proficient:** Judo and Boxing

Camp Half-Blood provides classes in wrestling, martial arts, and boxing for all campers. The reason why Seth is marked expert and proficient is because he is comparatively less skilled and durable than the Ares campers, who are masters in all three. Seth learned Karate and Tae Kwon Do from his training with Clare, who is also a master in these two styles. He learned the remaining styles, Muay Thai, Capoeira, and Judo, from Lynetta Lin. Besides Ares' kids, Athena's kids are also said to fight very well in unarmed combat.

**WEAPON SKILLS (A)** – Seth Hunter is a long-range and close-range fighter, and he alternates between them constantly during battles; he would have a disadvantage against a mid-range fighter like Percy, a master swordsman, because he would either need to get close enough to get past his guard or be far enough away to have time to set his bow and release his arrows. The switches also leave Seth open and vulnerable for a couple seconds each time. His given blessings account for these weaknesses, however, making Seth Hunter a formidable opponent with little openings when armed. Overall, Seth Hunter can master many kinds of weapons faster than normal, and even quicker if he has natural affinity for the weapon (e.g. projectile/orange weaponry)

**Master:** Archery, Knives/Daggers, and Guns

**Expert:** Spears and Javelins (for Hunter, however, he is a master lancer/spearman)

**Proficient:** Swords (Seth has improved from having no skill in swordsmanship to being proficient at using it. While Seth is able to use lighter swords like katanas and rapiers well, he still lacks the field experience master and expert swordsman have)

**INTELLECTUAL / MENTAL CAPABILITIES (B+)** – Seth and Hunter both have high intellectual capacities and usually think before they act. Seth is detail-oriented and tends to overthink on some things though, and sometimes misses the opportunity to do what he needs to do, but he is an excellent strategist (he came up with the plan to beat the Hunters at
Capture the Flag). Annabeth relies on him a lot to make sure her own plans are foolproof. Hunter is also good at strategies, but unlike Seth, he sometimes changes plans spontaneously without thinking through the long-term consequences.

**Master Astrologist** – Seth can map out the stars and use them as his guide

**Master Tracker** – Seth's tracking skills exceeds the Hunters, except for Phoebe, who is on par; only Artemis and Lappy (and Orion probably) are better trackers than him.

**Aura Detection** – can detect gods and demigods effectively; some trouble with legacies

**Master Strategist** – second to Annabeth and Malcolm, who are also master strategists

**Expert Technician** – on par with the Hunters of Artemis and Hermes and Hephaestus kids when it comes to traps; knows how to assemble and dissemble various firearms; children of Hephaestus (and Athena's probably in the crafts department) would be Master Technicians

**Expert Healer** – can diagnose a patient's physical conditions within a few minutes of seeing them, however, Seth cannot immediately detect internal conditions such as cancer, Alzheimer's, and allergies immediately and he can only treat patients by physical means. Will Solace would be a Master Healer who can heal patients by song and physical means, and diagnose and treat external and internal injuries in a few hours at most.

**Ancient Greek and Latin Fluency**

Diagnosed with Dyslexia; trouble reading and writing in English

**Psychological Warfare** – Both Seth and Hunter are capable of this, but Hunter is more adept at this skill than Seth, who prefers not to mess with people's minds.

**Sharp Memory** – this applies to Hunter more so than Seth; after spending almost all his life in the back of Seth's mind, he could extract memories very quickly and help Seth recall them too. It's almost like having Eidetic Memory, but minus the minor details and clarity. If Seth or Hunter dismisses the memory as insignificant they will not remember it or recall it all like those with Eidetic memory do.

**Amokinesis Immunity** - As the heir of Artemis, a virgin goddess, Seth can repel back allures and charmspeak, but he could still fall victim to its influence if he is caught unaware, weakened, or if the user's charm is too overpowering.

**Expert Musician** - Seth can master any instrument much faster than most; for children of Apollo, if they have the skill, can master any instrument with little effort and create their own songs (e.g. Kayla, daughter of Apollo, is a piano prodigy and would be a Master Musician)

- As noted by Apollo, Seth has a slightly above average singing voice. Given a choice, however, Seth would choose not to sing in front of others because he dislikes the attention.

- **Dancer** –Seth was taught ballroom dancing and other classical styles by the Apollo Cabin, which he picked up on quickly.

**Split Personality** - this is a strength and a weakness, and this aspect is what prevented me from giving Seth an A. If Seth is too preoccupied with Hunter, then he could be taken off guard. If Seth and Hunter end up fighting, then the one who surfaces after would suffer a massive migraine. Blackouts and memory loss also wear Seth down, and leaves him vulnerable to psychological threats and mind invasions.
GODLY POWERS (B-) – Seth’s godly powers are nowhere near as powerful or versatile as the Big Three Children (who would each have an A+) and the abilities he has are mostly restricted, inflexible, and/or not as strong as others. They are mostly helpful for enhancing his physical prowess than as a standalone power.

Argentokinesis – the ability to manipulate celestial silver. Seth still needs to start from the base form (bow and knives) and then morph it to something different. Seth is able to morph the silver to anything he likes as long as he has the imagination and energy to do so. The bigger the change, the more energy it takes Seth to create. If too much energy is sapped, then Seth would be unable to defend himself and forced to fall asleep for hours to recover fully. The changes are also temporary and can only last as long as Seth can make it.

Celestial Silver Weapon Summoning – a blessing from Artemis; all her Hunters also have this skill

Aura Erasure – Seth can mask his aura by minimizing it enough to resemble a mortal for a brief time; children of Hades, Hermes, and Hecate, the goddess of magic and the Mist, are also capable of this skill. However, certain gods and goddesses like Athena have this ability, but isn't transferred to their children. This skill can be taught, but it will take a long time to master for those who don't have the natural affinity, especially if the person's aura is great. Currently, Thalia is trying to master this skill with Artemis’ help.

Small Item Summoning – a blessing from Nemesis; allows Seth to summon any small items he has seen before with an accurate mental image of where he last saw it. He can also allow things to vanish and return to their original spot.

- Weaknesses- No weapons of power can be summoned using this blessing. If the item has been moved from where Seth last saw it, then it will not come.

Familiar Bond – Seth can telepathically communicate and contact the Laelaps (Lappy) anywhere within 250 miles

Commands absolute obedience over dogs, stags, and other woodland animals

- This includes man-made/automaton dogs such as Aurum and Argentum

- Hellhounds are an exception- they obey only Hades and his children, if they are strong enough. (Mrs. O'Leary, however, is a special case; her former master being Daedalus, and now Percy Jackson)

Expert Mist Manipulator - Seth has an adequate grasp of using the Mist, but if he is under too much duress or panic, he may mess up and fail at using the Mist correctly. Thalia Grace, Alabaster Torrington, and Hazel Levesque (of course) are Master Mist Manipulators. It is strongly hinted that other children of Hecate are also skilled at using the Mist.

A/N: So there you have it. This list ended up taking longer to conjure up than anticipated. Before any of you accuse me of making Seth Hunter too OP, remember that Seth Hunter is NOT a demigod son of Artemis because if he was, then a lot of this stuff on here will change. Seth Hunter, as stated by Artemis in a previous chapter, is meant to be at least on par with children of the Big Three. He may not be able to create storms like Thalia or cause massive floods like Percy, but Seth is still a force to be reckoned with, just on a more subtle level. And why should Seth Hunter be on par or surpass demigods like Percy and Thalia? Well, you'll just have to read the sequel to find out why.

If you still think his abilities are too OP, be sure to check out Percy Jackson's own list of abilities on the Camp Half-Blood Wiki or Thalia's, Nico's, and any of the Seven, and you will see that Seth's
abilities are relatively tame, given his lack of mortal blood. Feel free to review or PM me if you have further questions/concerns about this list or the hints I gave, and as a bonus, please tell me which of Seth's abilities is your favorite or would like to see more of.

Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy the final sequel.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!