Past and Future Demigods Put Together to Read

by CelestialTitania

Summary

A reading about Percy's adventures while fixing relationships in Greek mythology, based of their personalities in the books. Several confrontations throughout mythology will also take place.
Chapter 1

Percy pov:

I stood in the arena hacking away at the dummies. The straw spilled out easily with a twist of my sword and I gave a yell. I was frustrated. The battle with Kronos had ended a couple of months ago, but now that it was over, I didn't know what to do. So I just came down here to vent it out and after a while I was able to calm down. I wiped my brow and drank some water. I turned to go back to my cabin when a sea-green light enveloped me.

Thalia pov:

I slowly crept forward holding my bow when I heard the creature's footsteps. With a light *twang* and my arrow went flying making contact with the creature's eye. I stepped out from behind the bush and saw a beautiful golden deer. I quickly muttered an incantation in Ancient Greek and put my hand on it saying a soft blessing. A deer. I couldn't believe my luck, it was Lady Artemis' scared animal and she rarely let anyone kill it. I had obviously been blessed by my lady. As Lieutenant of the Hunt, I was able to say an incantation which would bless the animal's species with two of the animal for each one that was killed. Suddenly I saw a silvery-blue light and stalked up to it quickly. The logical side of me told me to leave it alone but the Huntress side was demanding to know what it was. I reached out my hand to touch it when without warning I was free falling towards the ground.

Nico pov:

I was in the Underworld trying to stay as far away from Persephone after she had just turned me into a dandelion again, when a dark light the colour of Dad's robes caught my attention. It flicked around as if it was trying to catch my attention. I cautiously walked towards the light and was pulled in and found myself falling with a screaming girl. "Thals?" I heard a boy ask. "Thalia? Percy?" I questioned them "Nico?!" they screamed. We fell to the floor when a padded netting of sorts caught us.

It was the winter solstice and Zeus was talking about some boring thing like usual and the four heroes Hercules, Perseus, Theseus and Orion were invited to watch. He was just about to finish when three teenagers fell from the sky. Hera looked grateful for the interruption and waved her hand so a special Greek sheet filled with feathers and moss appeared beneath the falling children. It caught two of them but the older of the two boys fell on to the hard tiled floor. They all expected him to be dead so it was a real surprise when he got up. "Why does something like that always happen to me?" he asked. "I mean seriously I land two steps away from the thing while you two land on it!" The younger boy laughed "well Percy me and Thalia are just special like that." The boy, Percy hissed "oh shut up Nico, let's see where we are."

Zeus getting impatient demanded to know who they were.

Nico paled "You really don't know who we are? You didn't summon us?"

Zeus straightened with pride thinking that he was able to summon mortals like that but answered "No, so introduce yourselves." Suddenly a large box dropped into the center of the room. then a note fluttered to the ground. Thalia bent down to pick it up.

"There's a note and it says:
"Dear confused and maybe angry gods and demigods,

Three of you from the future along with these books have gone back about a thousand years at least, and you are there to read about a very special demigod while they were at a big war,’

"War?” Ares muttered suddenly interested

"this demigod is Percy Jackson and don't worry time has stopped while you read this and in case you were wondering Zeus your future self approves of this plan. Artemis call Zoë Nightshade so we have another Hunter, Poseidon call Amphitrite and Triton and Hades call Persephone. Also do not hurt the future demigods no matter what happens, otherwise you will have to answer to us. Have a good reading!

By the most awesome gods ever Apollo and Hermes and the Fates,"

PS: Future Demigods please introduce yourselves by just name. This is because it might ruin the story. Thank you!

The tree of them looked towards each other and sighed. The boys nudged the girl to go first.

She shook her head exasperatedly but said "I am Thalia Grace." Then the shorter one wearing all black stated "I am Nico Di'Angelo," and sat down. The tall one shook his head "I'm Percy Jackson."

Then Zeus nodded towards the other four demigods. They introduced themselves as Perseus, Theseus, Orion and Hercules respectively. At Hercules Percy lunged and Thalia and Nico held him back.

"Percy calm down, we know but not now. Later alright?" Percy reluctantly nodded.

Artemis nodded "Alright then, I'll call Zoë," and suddenly the Huntress was there. Artemis quickly explained what was happening and she nodded though she was tense.

"Zoë please state your name and title in case the future demigods do not know you." Artemis asked her. Zoë, obeying her mistress told them "I am Zoë Nightshade, Lieutenant of Lady Artemis." The future demigods all looked away not able to meet her eye.

Hades and Poseidon called their wives and kid respectively. Persephone was given a throne next to Hades with black and red roses as a backseat with dozens of other flowers weaved in. Amphitrite's throne was next to Poseidon made from something that looked like the bottom half of an oyster and a backseat with a dozen, glimmering pearls. Triton's throne was next to Amphitrite's and looked a lot like Poseidon's but much more plain.

Hestia conjured benches for the demigods to sit on, and they silently thanked her.

"I guess we have to read these books, what are they called?" Percy muttered


"I'll read first.” Hera announced...Chapter 1...I Accidentally Vaporize My Pre-Algebra Teacher
I've been interested in the aspects of Greek mythology and I thought that Percy's story has so many elements of it, so why not try and work out those problems while having the gods realize how everything will change in the future. Hope you all enjoy.
Look I didn't want to be a half-blood.

All the demigods nodded wholeheartedly making the gods guilty and shocked.

If you're reading this because you think you might be one my advice is:

"Oh my gods! Percy? Giving advice? Run for cover!" Thalia shouted, making all the demigods laugh.

-close this book right now. Believe whatever lie your mom or dad told you about your birth and try to lead a normal life.

"Not bad Kelp Head, not bad," Thalia complimented while Demeter grumbled saying something how parents shouldn't have to lie to their children.

Being a half-blood is dangerous.

"Check," Nico confirmed

It's scary.

"Check," Theseus muttered making both Poseidon and Athena turn towards him.

Most of the time, it gets you killed in painful, nasty ways.

"Double Check," all the demigods excluding Zoë chorused. The gods turned pale.

If you're a normal kid, reading this because you think it's fiction, great. Read on. I envy you for being able to believe that none of this ever happened.

"Why would mortals read this?" Athena leaned forward and the futures shrugged.

But if you recognize yourself in these pages-if you feel something stirring inside-stop reading immediately. You might be one of us. And once you know that, it's only a matter of time before they sense it too, and they'll come for you.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

"You didn't warn me," Thalia and Nico said in sync. "Thalia," Percy rolled his eyes "back then I didn't know you and Nico, well I'm sorry for being to busy, saving you from a manticore." The gods had slightly widened eyes.

My name is Percy Jackson.

Zoë rolled her eyes "No, how could that be? Men, so foolish." Hercules turned away from her feeling for the first time guilty.

I'm twelve years old. Until a few months ago, I was a boarding student at Yancy Academy, a
private school for troubled kids in upstate New York.

Am I a troubled kid?

"Yes," Thalia and Nico answered and Percy glared at them "Feel'in the love."

Yeah. You could say that.

Thalia burst out laughing and Nico spluttered out. "Wow Perce, even you admit it."

I could start at any point in my short miserable life to prove it, but things really started going bad last May, when our sixth-grade class took a field trip to Manhattan- twenty-eight mental-case kids and two teachers on a yellow school bus, heading to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to look at ancient Greek and Roman stuff.

Athena brightened "That sounds fascinating. " While at the exact same time "Ugh," Orion, Poseidon and Triton groaned "sounds like torture."

I know-it sounds like torture.

Everyone had to stifle their laughter.

Most Yancy field trips were.

But Mr. Brunner, our Latin teacher, was leading this trip, so I had hopes.

Mr. Brunner was this middle-aged guy in a motorized wheelchair. He had thinning hair and a scruffy beard and a frayed tweed jacket, which always smelled like coffee.

"Hmm," the past demigods mused "This person sounds familiar." The futures only shared secretive smirks.

You wouldn't think he'd be cool, but he told stories and jokes and let us play games in class. He also had this awesome collection of Roman armor and weapons, so he was the only teacher whose class didn't put me to sleep.

Athena and Theseus looked appalled "You slept in class?" they both questioned Percy. He only shrugged in response.

I hoped the trip would be okay. At least, I hoped that for once I wouldn't get in trouble.

Thalia and Nico scoffed.

Boy, was I wrong.

"Knew it!" Nico called out, and Perseus whispered to Orion "Whose kid do you think he is?" Even Theseus was stumped.

See, bad things happen to me on field trips. Like at my fifth-grade school, when we went to the Saratoga battlefield, I had this accident with a Revolutionary War cannon. I wasn't aiming for the school bus, but of course I got expelled anyway.

Hermes and Apollo burst out laughing. They were beginning to like this kid and planned to have him help out on pranks.
Hestia frowned "Then what were you aiming for?"

Percy laughed "It happened so long ago, I forgot." He said looked up at her warmly. She smiled back happily.

"Where's Dionysus?" Percy asked, the thought striking him.

Zeus answered "He went to fetch his wife. Said that he didn't want to listen to a hero's story without her."

Percy nodded "Lord Zeus can you bring him up here faster? It doesn't feel the same to be on Olympus without Dionysus getting my name wrong."

Nico gasped "Peter Johnson, how dare you? Pedro I demand to not be called to read with you brats. Now go away Perry Jonason." The future demigods burst out laughing

"Mr. D doesn't sound like that," Thalia choked out.

Zeus sighed and with a snap of his fingers and Dionysus was standing in front of them holding Ariadne's hand. Theseus looked at the floor upset he had to leave Ariadne. They were quickly filled in and they continued to read.

"Mr. D?" Orion's face was remarkable, eyes wide in surprise.

Percy shrugged "He is the camp director." Dionysus raised an eyebrow confused. Percy elaborated "You're the camp director, at the camp which is the only safe place in the world for demigods."

"Thank you for revealing the dreadful news to me Peter Johnson." Percy, Nico and Thalia burst out laughing and the gods understood their little act from before. Dionysus narrowed his eyes and Hermes and Apollo grinned, "Sup D?" Dionysus groaned and Ariadne laughed.

Theseus looked at the floor her laugh was beautiful. He hated that he had listened to Athena and abandoned her.

"Well? Let's read!"

And before that, at my fourth-grade school, when we took a behind-the-scenes tour of the Marine World shark pool, I sort of hit the wrong lever on the catwalk and our class took an unplanned swim.

Apollo and Hermes grinned. Oh they couldn't wait to pull this kid away, he was pure GOLD! Everyone else was laughing so hard their sides hurt and it took a while before they calmed down. Even Zoë had a hard time calming down.

And the time before that… Well, you get the idea.

"Noooo, we wanted to hear more." Apollo and Hermes pouted. Artemis glared at the two.

This trip, I was determined to be good.

"What? No! Don't break the record!" Apollo couldn't help but burst out. Hercules was annoyed at how the gods were enjoying this "stupid demigod's" antics and Zoë and Artemis rolled their eyes. As if a man could ever be good.

All the way into the city, I put up with Nancy Bobofit, the freckly, redhead kleptomaniac
girl, hitting my best friend Grover in the back of the head with chunks of peanut butter-and-ketchup sandwich.

"Eww!" Aphrodite shrieked. "I don't know what that is, but it sounds disgusting."

"It is." Thalia spat, sharing a dark look with Percy.

Grover was an easy target. He was scrawny. He cried when he got frustrated. He must've been held back several grades, because he was the only sixth grader with acne and the start of a wispy beard on his chin. On top of all that, he was crippled.

"Nice description," Hermes glanced at Percy who looked sheepish.

"I can't wait to tell Grover," spoke up Nico sharing a wicked grin with Thalia.

He had a note excusing him from PE for the rest of his life because he had some kind of muscular disease in his legs. He walked funny, like every step hurt him, but don't let that fool you. You should've seen him run when it was enchilada day in the cafeteria.

Thalia groaned "Way to blow your cover Goat Boy."

Hermes looked amused "My son's subjects are amazing creatures aren't they?" All the gods agreed remembering how Pan saved them from a battle against the Titans, but the future trio had sad looks on their faces. The gods grew worried at their reaction. What was going to happen?

Anyway, Nancy Bobofit was throwing wads of sandwich that stuck in his curly brown hair, and she knew I couldn't do anything back to her because I was already on probation. The headmaster had threatened me with death by in-school suspension if anything bad, embarrassing, or even mildly entertaining happened on this trip.

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

Ares' eyes gleamed "DO IT!" Hera and Aphrodite slapped him upside the head at the same time.

"Behave yourself!" They scolded Ares, and Percy had to restrain his laughter. *They were in the future. My dad doesn't know who I am yet and Ares may be able to kill me by showing his true godly form. He has nothing to worry about right now. Well except the Fates, but who knows if he even remembers that.* Percy reminded himself.

Grover tried to calm me down. "It's okay. I like peanut butter."

Nico looked at the book weirdly and Percy raised a brow "So does Tyson, but I bet even he wouldn't want any in his hair."

Theseus frowned "Um, what is peanut butter?" The future looked surprised for a split second.

"Ah," Percy remembered first, "peanut butter hasn't been invented yet."

Thalia nodded "It's like taking a type of nut and churning it a lot."

"Um, OK," Theseus was still confused but now he knew better then to ask the future demigods to explain. They were horrible at it!

He dodged another piece of Nancy's lunch.
"That's it." I started to get up, but Grover pulled me back to my seat.

Ares booed softly in his seat, and now Percy was glaring at the floor. "Hmm, maybe you should have told someone in charge?" Amphitrite suggested softly. She normally didn't like heroes, after all so many were sired by her husband but this demigod was making her feel oddly attached to him.

Percy shook his head "As if they would believe me." Ariadne and Amphitrite looked at the boy and cooed softly. This action made Poseidon, Triton, Theseus and Dionysus feel angry and annoyed.

"You're already on probation," he reminded me."You know who'll get blamed if anything happens."

Looking back on it, I wish I'd decked Nancy Bobofit right then and there. In-school suspension would've been nothing compared to the mess I was about to get myself into. Mr. Brunner led the museum tour. He rode up front in his wheelchair, guiding us through the big echoing galleries, past marble statues and glass cases full of really old black-and-orange pottery. It blew my mind that this stuff had survived for two thousand, three thousand years.

"Longer probably," Artemis and Zoë scoffed. Typical men to be ignorant of the facts.

He gathered us around a thirteen-foot-tall stone column with a big sphinx on the top, and started telling us how it was a grave marker, a stele, for a girl about our age. He told us about the carvings on the sides. I was trying to listen to what he had to say, because it was kind of interesting, but everybody around me was talking, and every time I told them to shut up, the other teacher chaperon, Mrs. Dodds, would give me the evil eye.

Nico frowned 'Mrs. Dodds? Isn't that what Percy had called Alec- oh no, she didn't.'

Mrs. Dodds was this little math teacher from Georgia who always wore a black leather jacket, even though she was fifty years old. She looked mean enough to ride a Harley right into your locker. She had come to Yancy halfway through the year, when our last math teacher had a nervous breakdown.

Hades and Persephone glanced at each other. The two had suspicion about she was and wondered why she was there.

From her first day, Mrs. Dodds loved Nancy Bobofit and figured I was devil spawn.

"Devil spawn?" Thalia asked "Nah she got that wrong, that's Nico," whispering in said boy's ear.

"Yeah," Nico agreed until realization struck "HEY!"

She would point her crooked finger at me and say, "Now, honey," real sweet, and I knew I was going to get after-school detention for a month.

Hermes looked horrified "That's torture!" He paused. "Right?"

"Sort of."

One time, after she'd made me erase answers out of old math workbooks until midnight, I told Grover I didn’t think Mrs. Dodds was human. He looked at me, real serious, and said,"You're absolutely right."
Dionysus looked horrified "Those satyrs!" They all looked at him in shock.

"Mr. D you were listening?" He scowled "Of course not Pedro! Now continue reading."

Apollo shrugged "Sure D." Dionysus groaned and Ariadne squeezed his hand. Theseus was upset but he knew it was because of his own decisions and choices. He wanted fame and now look what happened.

Mr. Brunner kept talking about Greek funeral art.

Finally, Nancy Bobofit snickered something about the naked guy on the stele, and I turned around and said, "Will you shut up?"

It came out louder than I meant it to.

Zoë silently snickered "Of course it did, for thou are a boy." No one noticed Hercules flinch.

The whole group laughed. Mr. Brunner stopped his story.

"Mr. Jackson," he said, "did you have a comment?"

My face was totally red. I said, "No, sir."

Mr. Brunner pointed to one of the pictures on the stele. "Perhaps you'll tell us what this picture represents?"

I looked at the carving, and felt a flush of relief, because I actually recognized it. "That's Kronos eating his kids, right?"

The eldest gods: Hestia, Hades, Hera, Poseidon, and Demeter looked at each other and mournfully asked everyone else "Why does it have to be that one?" Zeus was thanking his lucky stars that he didn't have to be a part of it. Artemis who was connected to the stars by the moon and Apollo connected by the sun and the god of prophecy held in laughs at their father's words.

"Yes," Mr. Brunner said, obviously not satisfied. "And he did this because …"

"Well…" I racked my brain to remember. "Kronos was the king god, and-"

"KING GOD!" Zeus thundered standing up, master bolt in hand. "HOW,-"

"Peace brother, the teacher will correct the boy-" Hades began, "so you can end your drama show." Poseidon finished and Zeus had a hint of pink on his cheeks. The past demigods were in shock, two gods that they thought could have more power, made the King of the Gods flush. Did that mean something?

"God?" Mr. Brunner asked.

Just to add salt in the wound Hades and Poseidon grinned at each other and said "Told you."

"Titan," I corrected myself. "And … he didn't trust his kids, who were the gods. So, um, Kronos ate them, right? But his wife hid baby Zeus, and gave Kronos a rock to eat instead. And later, when Zeus grew up, he tricked his dad, Kronos, into barfing up his brothers and sisters-"
"Eeew!" said one of the girls behind me.

"Eeew? You try being in it and then see if eww, fits the bill, you stupid mortal!" Hera spat interrupting herself while shuddering at the memory. Zeus seeing Hera like that gave her a comforting hug, leaving everyone thinking they were delusional and crazy. She took in a breath and continued.

"-and so there was this big fight between the gods and the Titans," I continued, "and the gods won."

Theseus and Athena stared at Percy "You summarized the biggest war in our history-" she began and Theseus finished for her "in three measly sentences?!" Percy looked at them sheepishly.

Some snickers from the group.

"Why are they laughing? He got it right." Persephone asked in concern.

Hades turned to his wife "Don't worry my dear, no one can understand why mortals do anything," he told her squeezing her hand. Demeter watched softly happy that at least Hades cared about her Kore, but irritated he was the one who had to comfort her Kore. She sighed and decided to let it go just this once.

Behind me, Nancy Bobofit mumbled to a friend, "Like we're going to use this in real life. Like it's going to say on our job applications, 'Please explain why Kronos ate his kids.'"

"And why, Mr. Jackson," Brunner said, "to paraphrase Miss Bobofit's excellent question, does this matter in real life?"

"Busted," Hermes smirked.

"Busted," Grover muttered.

Everyone burst out laughing and Hestia smiled softly "like father, like son, like subject."

"HUH?!" Everyone was staring at her in confusion.

"You know Hermes is Pan's father, and Pan is a satyr and I'm sure that this person is actually-" she paused when she saw everyone trying to keep in laughs. Hestia sighed "Oh never mind," and promptly everyone let out their laughter. It took a while for them to regain focus.

"Shut up," Nancy hissed, her face even brighter red than her hair.

At least Nancy got packed, too. Mr. Brunner was the only one who ever caught her saying anything wrong. He had radar ears.

I thought about his question, and shrugged. "I don't know, sir."

"I see." Mr. Brunner looked disappointed. "Well, half credit, Mr. Jackson. Zeus did indeed feed Kronos a mixture of mustard and wine, which made him disgorge his other five children, who, of course, being immortal gods, had been living and growing up completely undigested in the Titan's stomach. The gods defeated their father, sliced him to pieces with his own scythe, and scattered his remains in Tartarus, the darkest part of the Underworld. On that happy note, it's time for lunch. Mrs. Dodds, would you lead us back outside?"
Hermes and Apollo looked appalled "Happy Note?!" Hestia, Hera and Demeter were trying to keep their nausea away. The memory still haunted them.

The class drifted off, the girls holding their stomachs, the guys pushing each other around and acting like doofuses.

Zoë and Artemis rolled their eyes "Men are doofuses."

Thalia shook her head "Not all men and in the future you both agree." Orion and Hercules looked slightly hopeful after those words.

Grover and I were about to follow when Mr. Brunner said, "Mr. Jackson."

I knew that was coming.

Orion looked at Percy "How? You're a child of Apollo?" Percy chuckled and just gestured toward the book making everyone who was eager for answers groan.

I told Grover to keep going. Then I turned toward Mr. Brunner. "Sir?"

Mr. Brunner had this look that wouldn't let you go- intense brown eyes that could've been a thousand years old and had seen everything.

They were all surprised and wondered who it could be.

"You must learn the answer to my question," Mr. Brunner told me.

"About the Titans?"

"About real life. And how your studies apply to it."

"Oh."

Nico laughed "Typical Percy answer," Percy being the mature person he is stuck his tongue out.

"What you learn from me," he said, "is vitally important. I expect you to treat it as such. I will accept only the best from you, Percy Jackson."

I wanted to get angry, this guy pushed me so hard.

Athena looked at him "For a good cause."

I mean, sure, it was kind of cool on tournament days, when he dressed up in a suit of Roman armor and shouted:"What ho!" and challenged us, sword-point against chalk, to run to the board and name every Greek and Roman person who had ever lived, and their mother, and what god they worshiped.

All the demigods except Zoë grinned and (excluding Zoë and Percy) shouted "I want him as my teacher!"

But Mr. Brunner expected me to be as good as everybody else, despite the fact that I have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder and I had never made above a C- in my life. No-he didn't expect me to be as good; he expected me to be better. And I just couldn't learn all those names and facts, much less spell them correctly.
Theseus looked like someone had told him everyone he cared about had died "A C-, I don't know what that is but it sounds horrible!"

Thalia laughed "It is," making Theseus groan.

I mumbled something about trying harder, while Mr. Brunner took one long sad look at the stele, like he'd been at this girl's funeral.

He told me to go outside and eat my lunch.

The class gathered on the front steps of the museum, where we could watch the foot traffic along Fifth Avenue.

Overhead, a huge storm was brewing, with clouds blacker than I'd ever seen over the city. I figured maybe it was global warming or something, because the weather all across New York state had been weird since Christmas.

All eyes on Zeus.

We'd had massive snow storms, flooding, wildfires from lightning strikes. I wouldn't have been surprised if this was a hurricane blowing in.

All eyes on Zeus and Poseidon. The two started to feel uncomfortable.

Nobody else seemed to notice. Some of the guys were pelting pigeons with Lunchables crackers. Nancy Bobofit was trying to pickpocket something from a lady's purse, and, of course, Mrs. Dodds wasn't seeing a thing. Grover and I sat on the edge of the fountain, away from the others. We thought that maybe if we did that, everybody wouldn't know we were from that school-the school for loser freaks who couldn't make it elsewhere.

Thalia and Nico gritted their teeth. Percy and Grover were not loser freaks.

"Detention?" Grover asked.

"Nah," I said. "Not from Brunner. I just wish he'd lay off me sometimes. I mean-I'm not a genius."

Thalia grinned and Nico said "Truer words have ever been spoken."

Percy rolled his eyes at the two.

Grover didn't say anything for a while. Then, when I thought he was going to give me some deep philosophical comment to make me feel better, he said, "Can I have your apple?"

Everyone stared at the person next to them, 1...2...3...4...5... laughter echoed in the throne room.

I didn't have much of an appetite, so I let him take it.

I watched the stream of cabs going down Fifth Avenue, and thought about my mom's apartment, only a little ways uptown from where we sat. I hadn't seen her since Christmas. I wanted so bad to jump in a taxi and head home. She'd hug me and be glad to see me, but she'd be disappointed, too. She'd send me right back to Yancy, remind me that I had to try harder, even if this was my sixth school in six years and I was probably going to be kicked out...
again. I wouldn't be able to stand that sad look she'd give me.

All the goddesses cooed softly and Amphitrite looked at Percy, 'You are a good hero. Please don't be his child and I might come to care about you and give you my blessing. Please.'

Mr. Brunner parked his wheelchair at the base of the handicapped ramp. He ate celery while he read a paperback novel. A red umbrella stuck up from the back of his chair, making it look like a motorized café table.

Hephaestus perked up wondering what the item was and if he could build it.

I was about to unwrap my sandwich when Nancy Bobofit appeared in front of me with her ugly friends-I guess she'd gotten tired of stealing from the tourists-and dumped her half-eaten lunch in Grover's lap.

Once again Nico was handed the task of refraining his two cousins from destroying something.

"Oops." She grinned at me with her crooked teeth. Her freckles were orange, as if somebody had spray-painted her face with liquid Cheetos.

Aphrodite looked horrified "How can anyone look so ugly?"

I tried to stay cool. The school counselor had told me a million times, "Count to ten, get control of your temper." But I was so mad my mind went blank. A wave roared in my ears.

Everyone's eyes narrowed 'wave'?

I don't remember touching her, but the next thing I knew, Nancy was sitting on her butt in the fountain, screaming, "Percy pushed me!"

Mrs. Dodds materialized next to us.

Some of the kids were whispering: "Did you see-"

"-the water-"

"-like it grabbed her-"

"Poseidon, his father is Poseidon," Triton said blankly. He had wanted to talk to this demigod, he was amusing yet... Triton sighed and Amphitrite cursed. How she had hoped but yet... As if following Trion's words a green glow lit up around the boy a trident shimmering above his head, and a note fluttered down. Perseus snatched it up and read:

*Gods and demigods of both future and past we apologize for the surprise. Just to now let you know every time a demigod's identity will be revealed they will be claimed by their godly parent. Well actually we're just making signs to make it be repeated in history. Sincerely Amazing Apollo, Incredible Hermes and the Fates.*

They all looked at Percy and Poseidon who seemed to be having a staring contest. Nico whispered to Thalia "Is it weird they're not yelling at him?"

She shook her head "No, the oath hasn't been made yet." Thalia decided to cut in between the two's silent reaction "Can we read on?" They simply nodded and she began.
I didn’t know what they were talking about. All I knew was that I was in trouble again.

As soon as Mrs. Dodds was sure poor little Nancy was okay, promising to get her a new shirt at the museum gift shop, etc., etc., Mrs. Dodds turned on me. There was a triumphant fire in her eyes, as if I'd done something she'd been waiting for all semester. "Now, honey-

"I know," I grumbled. "A month erasing workbooks."

"Never guess your punishment," Hermes told him bitterly

That wasn't the right thing to say.

"Knew it," Hermes' voice was very bitter and when they saw Hera smile sickeningly sweet they knew not to ask.

"Come with me," Mrs. Dodds said.

"Wait!" Grover yelped. "It was me. I pushed her."

Thalia smiled softly, slightly shocked "That stupid, loyal satyr!" Hermes looked at her. So he was a satyr, just like Pan. Hmmm.

I stared at him, stunned. I couldn't believe he was trying to cover for me. Mrs. Dodds scared Grover to death.

She glared at him so hard his whiskery chin trembled.

"I don't think so, Mr. Underwood," she said.

"But-

"You-will-stay-here."

Grover looked at me desperately.

"It's okay, man," I told him. "Thanks for trying."

"He did try." Percy said fondly.

"Goat boy is the best." Thalia agreed.

"Honey," Mrs. Dodds barked at me. "Now."

Nancy Bobofit smirked.

I gave her my deluxe I'll-kill-you-later stare.

Thalia and Nico shuddered while Percy smiled smugly. The people of the past knew not to ask.

Then I turned to face Mrs. Dodds, but she wasn't there. She was standing at the museum entrance, way at the top of the steps, gesturing impatiently at me to come on.

How’d she get there so fast?
I have moments like that a lot, when my brain falls asleep or something, and the next thing I know I’ve missed something, as if a puzzle piece fell out of the universe and left me staring at the blank place behind it. The school counselor told me this was part of the ADHD, my brain misinterpreting things.

Triton, Orion, Poseidon and Theseus spoke at the same time "I'm not sure."

I wasn't so sure.

A couple of people laughed trying to reduce the tension. Triton was annoyed he thought the same thing as Percy while he others were slightly happy. "Like father, like son, like brothers," Hestia said making everyone laugh again remembering what she had said previously.

I went after Mrs. Dodds.

"No don't go after her!" Perseus shouted worried about his namesake.

Halfway up the steps, I glanced back at Grover. He was looking pale, cutting his eyes between me and Mr. Brunner, like he wanted Mr. Brunner to notice what was going on, but Mr. Brunner was absorbed in his novel.

I looked back up. Mrs. Dodds had disappeared again. She was now inside the building, at the end of the entrance hall.

Okay, I thought. She's going to make me buy a new shirt for Nancy at the gift shop.

But apparently that wasn't the plan.

"It never is," The demigods all groaned.

I followed her deeper into the museum. When I finally caught up to her, we were back in the Greek and Roman section.

Except for us, the gallery was empty.

Mrs. Dodds stood with her arms crossed in front of a big marble frieze of the Greek gods. She was making this weird noise in her throat, like growling.

Even without the noise, I would've been nervous. It's weird being alone with a teacher, especially Mrs. Dodds. Something about the way she looked at the frieze, as if she wanted to pulverize it...

"You've been giving us problems, honey," she said.

I did the safe thing. I said, "Yes, ma'am."

Thalia seemed to be in a dream world "Percy...safe ...thing... Hahahahaha that is just to hard to believe."

She tugged on the cuffs of her leather jacket. "Did you really think you would get away with it?"

"Get away with what!" Athena shouted frustrated.
"Don't know Bird-Brain but maybe if you shut up we'll find out." Poseidon retorted, the insults being fired back and forth.

Theseus finally cut in "Lady Athena, Father please calm down."

Aphrodite pouted "Why did you stop them? The Pothena was absolutely amazing." Everyone stared at her "It's a couple pairing name for Poseidon and Athena."

"WHAT?!" Amphitrite and Triton stood up along with Poseidon and Athena "That will NEVER happen Aphrodite!" Their voices were all filled with disgust. She pouted but let it go.

The look in her eyes was beyond mad. It was evil.

She's a teacher, I thought nervously. It's not like she's going to hurt me.

I said, "I'll-I'll try harder, ma'am."

Thunder shook the building.

Zeus frowned 'Why am I angry?' Unknown to him everyone but Percy was wondering the exact same thing.

"We are not fools, Percy Jackson," Mrs. Dodds said. "It was only a matter of time before we found you out. Confess, and you will suffer less pain."

I didn't know what she was talking about.

All I could think of was that the teachers must've found the illegal stash of candy I'd been selling out of my dorm room. Or maybe they'd realized I got my essay on Tom Sawyer from the Internet without ever reading the book and now they were going to take away my grade. Or worse, they were going to make me read the book.

"You are ridiculous." Athena sneered at Percy.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Ma'am, I don't..."

"Your time is up," she hissed.

Then the weirdest thing happened. Her eyes began to glow like barbecue coals. Her fingers stretched, turning into talons. Her jacket melted into large, leathery wings. She wasn't human. She was a shriveled hag with bat wings and claws and a mouth full of yellow fangs, and she was about to slice me to ribbons.

Hades stared up and he, Persephone and Nico said at the exact same time "Alecto." Hades frowned at Nico "How did you know," Persephone was staring at Nico intently.

He gulped "Um encountered her a couple of times," fake shuddered "was not pleasant." Hades looked at him curiously. "And you survived?"

Nico shrugged. "She wasn't interested in actually killing me." Hades rolled his eyes and Persephone had an amused expression, both knowing how Alecto enjoyed toying with heroes.
Then things got even stranger.

"How does it get stranger, then being attacked by a F- Kindly One?" Perseus asked and Percy shrugged.

Mr. Brunner, who'd been out in front of the museum a minute before, wheeled his chair into the doorway of the gallery, holding a pen in his hand.

"What ho, Percy!" he shouted, and tossed the pen through the air.

Mrs. Dodds lunged at me.

With a yelp, I dodged and felt talons slash the air next to my ear. I snatched the ballpoint pen out of the air, but when it hit my hand, it wasn't a pen anymore. It was a sword-Mr. Brunner's bronze sword, which he always used on tournament day.

Mrs. Dodds spun toward me with a murderous look in her eyes.

My knees were jelly. My hands were shaking so bad I almost dropped the sword.

She snarled, "Die, honey!"

And she flew straight at me.

Absolute terror ran through my body. I did the only thing that came naturally: I swung the sword.

"Naturally?!” The cry came from Ares "How is it- wait are you my descendant or something?"

Athena mock gasped "Ares asked something intelligent!"

"HEY!" Percy shrugged, Hades if he knew and gods forbid it be true.

The metal blade hit her shoulder and passed clean through her body as if she were made of water. Hisss!

Cheers went up and resounded throughout the throne room.

Mrs. Dodds was like a sand castle in front if a power fan. She exploded into yellow powder, vaporized on the spot, leaving nothing but the smell of sulfur and a dying screech and a chill of evil in the air, as if those two glowing red eyes were still watching me.

Amphitrite rolled her eyes. Of course a water reference.

I was alone.

There was a ballpoint pen in my hand.

Mr. Brunner wasn't there. Nobody was there but me.

My hands were still trembling. My lunch must've been contaminated with magic mushrooms or something.

Had I imagined the whole thing?
"You wish." Perseus said sympathetically.

Percy looked at his namesake seriously. "I do."

I went back outside.

It had started to rain.

Grover was sitting by the fountain, a museum map tented over his head. Nancy Bobofit was still standing there, soaked from her swim in the fountain, grumbling to her ugly friends. When she saw me, she said, "I hope Mrs. Kerr whipped your butt."

Theseus and Orion both asked "Who?"

I said, "Who?"

Hercules laughed "Siblings think alike." The three shared a smile.

"Our teacher. Duh!"

I blinked. We had no teacher named Mrs. Kerr. I asked Nancy what she was talking about. She just rolled her eyes and turned away.

I asked Grover where Mrs. Dodds was.

He said, "Who?"

But he paused first, and he wouldn't look at me, so I thought he was messing with me.

Hermes sighed dramatically "Satyrs can't lie. Its a pity, I've tried teaching Pan but alas!"

"Not funny, man," I told him. "This is serious."

Thunder boomed overhead.

Perseus laughed "Looks like Dad agrees!"

I saw Mr. Brunner sitting under his red umbrella, reading his book, as if he'd never moved.

I went over to him.

He looked up, a little distracted. "Ah, that would be my pen. Please bring your own writing utensil in the future, Mr. Jackson."

I handed Mr. Brunner his pen. I hadn't even realized I was still holding it.

"Sir," I said, "where's Mrs. Dodds?"

He stared at me blankly. "Who?"

"The other chaperon. Mrs. Dodds. The pre-algebra teacher."

He frowned and sat forward, looking mildly concerned. "Percy, there is no Mrs. Dodds on
this trip. As far as I know, there has never been a Mrs. Dodds at Yancy Academy. Are you feeling all right?"

Hermes nodded proudly "It's definitely Chiron, and good at least he can lie well." The past heroes were glad their teacher was still well in the future.

Hera closed the book and looked up "So who's going to read the next chapter?"

Theseus got up and took the book from Hera. "I will," he flipped to the correct page and began...Chapter 2: Three Old Ladies Knit the Socks of Death

Chapter End Notes

The first chapter. They're all interacting nicely. I wonder how long that will last.
I was used to the occasional odd experience, but they were usually over quickly. This 24/7 hallucination was more than I could handle. For the rest of the school year, the entire campus seemed to be playing a trick on me.

Orion winced. He could sympathize. He could swear Apollo was always playing tricks on him.

The students acted as if they were completely and totally convinced that Mrs. Kerr—a perky blond woman whom I'd never seen in my life until she got on our bus at the end of the field trip—had been our pre-algebra teacher since Christmas.

"Weird huh?" Thalia teased Percy who flushed, while the past demigods and gods were confused as to why this was. "Well I didn't know back then okay?" Athena frowned "Know what?" Nico spoke up "It'll explain."

Every so often I would spring a Mrs. Dodds reference on somebody, just to see if I could trip them up, but they would stare at me like I was psycho.

Athena looked as if she was going to explode if she didn't get any answers soon.

It got so I almost believed them—Mrs. Dodds had never existed.

Almost.

"I'm going to guess Grover?" Perseus asked surprising the futures. Percy nodded slowly.

But Grover couldn't fool me. When I mentioned the name Dodds to him, he would hesitate, then claim she didn't exist. But I knew he was lying.

Perseus grinned. It was fun being right.

Something was going on. Something had happened at the museum.

I didn't have much time to think about it during the days, but at night, visions of Mrs. Dodds with talons and leathery wings would wake me up in a cold sweat.

"Monster dreams." Hercules grit out, remembering his own.

The freak weather continued, which didn't help my mood. One night, a thunderstorm blew out the windows in my dorm room. A few days later, the biggest tornado ever spotted in the Hudson Valley touched down only fifty miles from Yancy Academy. One of the current events we studied in social studies class was the unusual number of small planes that had gone down in sudden squalls in the Atlantic that year.

Cue the looks at Zeus, who tried his best to hold out against the many stares, but still relatively new to the whole ruling business, he couldn't stop a tiny shiver from going down his spine. That made everyone smirk.
I started feeling cranky and irritable most of the time. My grades slipped from Ds to Fs. I got into more fights with Nancy Bobofit and her friends. I was sent out into the hallway in almost every class.

Thesues and Athena looked horrified "Let me guess," Theseus spoke in a strained voice, "that is an even worse thing than a C-?" Thalia held back a snicker "Yup!" Theseus groaned.

Finally, when our English teacher, Mr. Nicoll, asked me for the millionth time why I was too lazy to study for spelling tests, I snapped. I called him an old sot. I wasn't even sure what it meant, but it sounded good.

"It means an old drunk." Thalia told them laughing at Athena's questioning look. Apollo grinned "So basically D." Dionysus glared at Apollo for the two obvious reasons until Ariadne smilingly rested her hand on his arm.

The headmaster sent my mom a letter the following week, making it official: I would not be invited back next year to Yancy Academy.

Fine, I told myself. Just fine.

I was homesick.

I wanted to be with my mom in our little apartment on the Upper East Side, even if I had to go to public school and put up with my obnoxious stepfather and his stupid poker parties.


And yet... There were things I'd miss at Yancy. The view of the woods out my dorm window, the Hudson River in the distance, the smell of pine trees. I'd miss Grover, who'd been a good friend, even if he was a little strange. I worried how he'd survive next year without me.

Hermes looked at Percy "You're a good kid." Percy shrugged "Um, thanks?"

I'd miss Latin class, too. With Mr. Brunner's crazy tournament days and his faith that I could do well.

Athena smiled "That is a very good teacher."

As exam week got closer, Latin was the only test I studied for. I hadn't forgotten what Mr. Brunner had told me about this subject being life-and-death for me. I wasn't sure why, but I'd started to believe him.

Theseus and Perseus (who had taken a liking to his namesake) muttered "Good."

The evening before my final, I got so frustrated I threw the Cambridge Guide to Greek Mythology across my dorm room. Words had started swimming off the page, circling my head, the letters doing one-eighties as if they were riding skateboards. There was no way I was going to remember the difference between Chiron and Charon.

Athena looked at Percy incredulously, "How, sea spawn?" Percy shook his head "When it says that, not the actual people. Just the spellings. I mean it's pretty easy Charon: ferry guy, and Chiron:
centaur trainer." "It's a simple definition." Percy snapped when the other demigods and Zoë stared at him.

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

"Same concept." Hercules perked up "What's Latin?" Percy responded "Stuff you'll learn in about a thousand years." At blank looks Thalia added "A language."

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

I remembered Mr. Brunner's serious expression, his thousand-year-old eyes. I will accept only the best from you, Percy Jackson.

I took a deep breath. I picked up the mythology book. I'd never asked a teacher for help before. Maybe if I talked to Mr. Brunner he could give me some pointers. At least I could apologize for the big fat F, I was going to score on his exam.

"Cough 'teacher's pet' Cough" Thalia and Orion put in when Theseus nodded proudly at Percy. I didn't want to leave Yancy Academy with him thinking I hadn't tried.

"Teacher's pet." Perseus told his namesake and Percy in a robotic voice. Percy shook his head at Perseus' teasing tone.

I walked downstairs to the faculty offices. Most of them were dark and empty but Mr. Brunner's door was ajar, light from his window stretching across the hallway floor.

I was three steps away from the door handle when I heard voices inside the office. Mr. Brunner asked a question. A voice that was definitely Grover's said "…worried about Percy, sir."

I froze.

I'm not usually an eavesdropper,

Nico scoffed "Yeah sure. I completely believe you on that matter Percy."

Percy huffed "Yeah well, if you people didn't always keep stuff from me I wouldn't have to."

Nico raised a brow but let it go… for now.

But I dare you to try not listening when you hear your best friend talking about you to an adult.

"He's got a point." Hermes agreed, making everyone scoff.

"Hermes you'd agree with eavesdropping no matter what the reason." Persephone told him, making Hermes shrug indifferently.

I inched closer.

"Hey!" Apollo exclaimed turning to Hermes "I bet you 45 drachmas he'll get caught." Hermes grinned "Deal." They shook on it.
Orion looked at Hercules "Same deal?" He asked mischievously. Hercules scoffed "Get ready to lose."

Percy looked at the two bets in interest already knowing who would win and who would lose.

"…alone this summer," Grover was saying. "I mean, a Kindly One in the school! Now that we know for sure, and they know too—"

"We would only make matters worse by rushing him." Mr. Brunner said. "We need the boy to mature more."

Thalia and Nico snickered "Good luck with that." Percy pouted "So mean…” he said shaking his head disappointedly.

"But he may not have time. The summer solstice deadline—"

"Will have to be resolved without him, Grover. Let him enjoy his ignorance while he still can."

"Sir, he saw her."

"His imagination." Mr. Brunner insisted. "The Mist over the students and staff will be enough to convince him of that."

"What's the Mist?" Zoë asked curiously and Thalia answered uncertainly "I'm pretty sure there will be a good explanation about it in the upcoming chapters." Zoë nodded in understanding.

"Sir, I can't fail in my duties again." Grover's voice was chocked with emotion. "You know what that would mean."

Hermes looked worried "What would happen?" The futures looked at each other and said a word they were dying to say "Spoilers."

The three grinned sheepishly they had watched way too much Doctor Who, but that's a story for another time. The rest groaned in annoyance.

"You haven't failed Grover," Mr. Brunner said kindly. "I should have seen her for what she was. Now let's just worry about keeping Percy alive until next fall—"

The mythology book fell out of my hand and hit the floor with a thud.

Apollo and Hercules grinned at Orion and Hermes, who had begun to look a bit worried.

Mr. Brunner went silent.

My heart hammering, I picked up the book and backed down the hall.

Hermes sighed in relief "Good, never leave evidence."

A shadow slid across the lighted glass of Mr. Brunner's office door, the shadow of something much taller than my wheelchair-bound teacher, holding something that looked suspiciously like an archer's bow.
I opened the nearest door and slipped inside.

A few seconds later I heard a slow clop-clop-clop, like muffled word blocks,

"Hey! That's Chiron!" Apollo said as if he just realized it. Artemis groaned "Yes, we already knew that Apollo."

Apollo blinked innocently "We did?" But he shut up when he saw Artemis' evil glare.

then a sound that sounded like an animal snuffling right outside my door. A large dark shape paused right outside my door, and then moved on.

A bead of sweat trickled down my neck.

They all leaned forward wanting to find out what would happen.

Somewhere in the hallway Mr. Brunner spoke "Nothing," he murmured. "My nerves haven't been right since the winter solstice."

"Mine either." Grover agreed. "But I could've sworn..."

"Go back to your dorm." Mr. Brunner told him. "You've got a long day of exams tomorrow."

"Don't remind me."

The lights went out in Mr. Brunner's room.

"HAH!" Orion and Hermes shouted and stuck out their hand to their respective gambling partner "Pay up!"

Apollo and Hercules grumbled but did as told.

Percy grinned "Sorry Apollo, probably should've warned you not to bet, huh?"

Hercules glared and Apollo pouted then shrugged "Yeah! Next though okay cuz?"

Percy grinned wider "You bet!"

I waited in the dark for what felt like forever. Finally, I slipped out into the hallway and made my way back up to the dorm.

Grover was lying on his bed, studying his Latin exam notes like he'd been there all night.

"Now he's a good liar?" Nico asked incredulously. Thalia shrugged "He did get some training for this type of situation."

Athena and Theseus groaned "Don't suppose you'll tell us anything will you?" The three futures grinned "Nope!"

"Hey," he said bleary eyed. "You going to be ready for this test?"

I didn't answer.

"You look awful." He frowned. "Is everything okay?"
"Just... tired."

I turned so he couldn't read my expression,

"Satyrs can read your emotions sea spawn." Athena told Percy in an annoying voice that said 'You are such an idiot' which was really starting to annoy Percy.

"I didn't know he was a satyr." Percy bit out trying to not lose his temper.

and started getting ready for bed.

I didn't understand what I'd heard downstairs. I wanted to believe I'd imagined the whole thing.

But one thing was clear: Grover and Mr. Brunner were talking about me behind my back. They thought I was in some kind of danger.

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

"Ugh." Orion said "If that exam thing is anything like Theseus making sure we know stuff, I feel really bad for you."

my eyes swimming with all the Greek and Roman names I'd misspelled, Mr. Brunner called me back inside.

For a moment, I was worried he'd found out about my eavesdropping the night before, but that didn't seem to be the problem.

"Percy," he said. "Don't be discouraged about leaving Yancy. It's ... it's for the best."

Triton frowned "Isn't Chiron supposed to be the thoughtful one out of the three?" he asked remembering his own teachers Aphros and Bythos.

His tone was kind, but the words still embarrassed me. Even though he was speaking quietly, the other kids finishing the test could hear. Nancy Bobofit smirked at me and made sarcastic little kissing motions with her lips.

Aphrodite rose a brow "The girl likes you Percy."

Percy looked like he had been electrocuted a hundred times "You're kidding." He gasped out horror surfacing on his features.

Aphrodite shrugged "Sorry."

Zoë and Artemis frowned, yes that girl was a bit rude but it was just like a boy to act that immature and disrespectful.

I mumbled, "Okay, sir."

"I mean ..." Mr. Brunner wheeled his chair back and forth, like he wasn't sure what to say. "This isn't the right place for you. It was only a matter of time."

My eyes stung.
Persephone winced "Chiron really needs to learn some more tact."

Here was my favorite teacher, in front of the class, telling me I couldn’t handle it. After saying he believed in me all year, now he was telling me I was destined to get kicked out.

"Right," I said, trembling.

"No, no," Mr. Brunner said. "Oh, confound it all. What I'm trying to say ... you're not normal, Percy. That's nothing to be-

"Thanks," I blurted. "Thanks a lot, sir, for reminding me.

"Percy-"

But I was already gone.

On the last day of the term, I shoved my clothes into my suitcase.

The other guys were joking around, talking about their vacation plans. One of them was going on a hiking trip to Switzerland. Another was cruising the Caribbean for a month. They were juvenile delinquents, like me, but they were rich juvenile delinquents. Their daddies were executives, or ambassadors, or celebrities. I was a nobody, from a family of nobodies.

"HEY!" They all protested. Percy shrugged "Didn't know you back then. Don't think that anymore though." He offered as consolation. "Much." He muttered lowly.

They asked me what I'd be doing this summer and I told them I was going back to the city.

Hestia smiled "That was nice of them. Including you in their conversation."

What I didn't tell them was that I'd have to get a summer job walking dogs or selling magazine subscriptions, and spend my free time worrying about where I'd go to school in the fall.

"Oh," one of the guys said. "That's cool."

They went back to their conversation as if I'd never existed.

Hestia lost her smile "Never mind."

Demeter shook her head "They need more bread." Of course that made Hades groan in annoyance and Persephone patted his arm comfortingly.

The only person I dreaded saying good-bye to was Grover, but as it turned out, I didn't have to. He'd booked a ticket to Manhattan on the same Greyhound as I had, so there we were, together again, heading into the city.

Nico smiled a creepy smile sharing a disturbing look with Apollo "Coincidence? I think not." They whispered in a creepy tone.

During the whole bus ride, Grover kept glancing nervously down the aisle, watching the other passengers. It occurred to me that he'd always acted nervous and fidgety when we left Yancy, as if he expected something bad to happen. Before, I'd always assumed he was worried about
getting teased. But there was nobody to tease him on the Greyhound.

Finally I couldn't stand it anymore.

I said, "Looking for Kindly Ones?"

Suddenly a huge gap opened up in the throne room and three bat-like creatures appeared.

Hades and Persephone stood up in complete surprise. "Alecto? Megaera? Tisiphone?" Hades asked "Why are the three of you here?"

Alecto bowed "My Lord, we heard our name and came to see what had happened.

Hades sighed "I didn't call you. Anyhow now that you're here might as well stay."

Grover nearly jumped out of his seat. "Wha-what do you mean?"

I confessed about eavesdropping on him and Mr. Brunner the night before the exam.

Hermes groaned "You aren't supposed to confess!"

Grover's eye twitched. "How much did you hear?"

"Oh … not much. What's the summer solstice dead-line?"

He winced. "Look, Percy … I was just worried for you, see? I mean, hallucinating about demon math teachers …"

"Grover-"

"And I was telling Mr. Brunner that maybe you were overstressed or something, because there was no such person as Mrs. Dodds, and …"

Thalia rolled her eyes "Grover is a really, really bad liar."

"Grover, you're a really, really bad liar."

Percy and Thalia looked at each other in shock "Don't copy me Kelp Head/Pinecone Face!"

His ears turned pink.

From his shirt pocket, he fished out a grubby business card. "Just take this, okay? In case you need me this summer.

The card was in fancy script, which was murder on my dyslexic eyes, but I finally made out something like:

Grover Underwood

Keeper

Half-Blood Hill

Long Island, New York
"What's Half-"

"Don't say it aloud!" he yelped. "That's my, um … summer address."

My heart sank. Grover had a summer home. I'd never considered that his family might be as rich as the others at Yancy.

"Okay," I said glumly. "So, like, if I want to come visit your mansion."

"Not a mansion." Nico stated shaking his head. Percy grinned "Nope! Way better." Thalia nodded "No place like it."

No one saw Nico fidget uncomfortably.

He nodded. "Or … or if you need me."

"Why would I need you?"

Ariadne frowned "He's your friend isn't he?" Theseus tried to not look guilty.

Percy nodded "Yeah." Ariadne smiled softly "Well, then of course you'd need him."

Percy smiled "I know. It's just I was a bit annoyed and upset and… it's hard to explain.

It came out harsher than I meant it to.

Percy looked as if the line proved it "See." Dionysus rolled his eyes, he did not want his wife to start feeling sorry for another on of Poseidon's brats.

Grover blushed right down to his Adam's apple. "Look, Percy, the truth is, I-I kind of have to protect you."

I stared at him.

All year long, I'd gotten in fights, keeping bullies away from him. I'd lost sleep worrying that he'd get beaten up next year without me.

Aphrodite, Persephone, Demeter, Ariadne, Hestia and Hera cooed. This hero was definitely a good one.

And here he was acting like he was the one who defended me.

"Grover," I said, "what exactly are you protecting me from?"

There was a huge grinding noise under our feet. Black smoke poured from the dashboard and the whole bus filled with a smell like rotten eggs. The driver cursed and limped the Greyhound over to the side of the highway.

After a few minutes clanking around in the engine compartment, the driver announced that we'd all have to get off. Grover and I filed outside with everybody else.

We were on a stretch of country road-no place you'd notice if you didn't break down there.
On our side of the highway was nothing but maple trees and litter from passing cars. On the other side, across four lanes of asphalt shimmering with afternoon heat, was an old-fashioned fruit stand.

The stuff on sale looked really good: heaping boxes of bloodred cherries and apples, walnuts and apricots, jugs of cider in a claw-foot tub full of ice.

"That fruit sounds really tasty." Apollo said dreamily, waving a hand for the food appear in front of everyone. Everyone took a bit, and since it was godly the taste was divine.

There were no customers, just three old ladies sitting in rocking chairs in the shade of a maple tree, knitting the biggest pair of socks I'd ever seen.

I mean these socks were the size of sweaters, but they were clearly socks. The lady on the right knitted one of them. The lady on the left knitted the other. The lady in the middle held an enormous basket of electric-blue yarn.

All three women looked ancient, with pale faces wrinkled like fruit leather, silver hair tied back in white bandannas, bony arms sticking out of bleached cotton dresses.

Hades and the Furies realized first and they all looked at Percy as if he were a ghost.

Nico and Persephone realized at the same time and they grew pale. And Nico was already unnaturally pale.

The weirdest thing was, they seemed to be looking right at me.

I looked over at Grover to say something about this and saw that the blood had drained from his face. His nose was twitching.

That was when everyone else realized. Thalia glared at Percy wishing desperately that she could shock him. Worry and fear were evident in her and Nico's faces.

"Grover?" I said. "Hey, man-"

"Tell me they're not looking at you. They are, aren't they?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh? You think those socks would fit me?"

"Not funny Percy. Not funny at all." Hermes said.

"Not funny, Percy. Not funny at all."

No one even cracked a smile at Hermes saying the same thing as Grover.

The old lady in the middle took out a huge pair of scissors-gold and silver, long-bladed, like shears. I heard Grover catch his breath.

"We're getting on the bus," he told me. "Come on."

"Go, go, go." Poseidon found himself muttering under his breath which shocked him and he looked beside him to see Amphitrite, Triton and everyone in the entire throne room doing the exact same thing. Even Zoë and Artemis and they hated the male gender.
Well excluding the Furies, everyone was chanting for Percy to go in the bus.

"What?" I said. "It's a thousand degrees in there."

"Come on!!" He pried open the door and climbed inside, but I stayed back.

"Can you ever listen?" Numerous people snapped. Even though they didn't know Percy too well, none of them wanted him to die for no reason whatsoever.

Across the road, the old ladies were still watching me. The middle one cut the yarn, and I swear I could hear that snip across four lanes of traffic. Her two friends balled up the electric-blue socks, leaving me wondering who they could possibly be for-Sasquatch or Godzilla.

"How are you alive?" Triton asked Percy not understanding. If the Fates cut his cord then either he would die sometime soon or should already be dead.

Percy shrugged "Spoilers."

Thalia and Nico came out of their stupor and frowned "Hey! You can't do that without us!"

Percy sighed "Fine."

At the rear of the bus, the driver wrenched a big chunk of smoking metal out of the engine compartment. The bus shuddered, and the engine roared back to life.

The passengers cheered.

"Darn right!" yelled the driver. He slapped the bus with his hat. "Everybody back on board!"

"Yeah, now it works." Apollo said bitterly. He had also not chanted for Percy to go in the bus, since he knew that if the Fates wanted to show him something, Percy would see it.

Once we got going, I started feeling feverish, as if I'd caught the flu.

The nervous faces were back and it didn't help that Nico and Thalia looked close to hyperventilating.

Grover didn't look much better. He was shivering and his teeth were chattering.

"Grover?"

"Yeah?"

"What are you not telling me?"

"Everything." Everyone muttered a bit annoyed at the Fates. Well excluding Percy obviously.

He dabbed his forehead with his shirt sleeve. "Percy, what did you see back at the fruit stand?"

"You mean the old ladies? What is it about them, man? They're not like … Mrs. Dodds, are they?"

His expression was hard to read, but I got the feeling that the fruit-stand ladies were something much, much worse than Mrs. Dodds. He said, "Just tell me what you saw."
"The middle one took out her scissors, and she cut the yarn."

He closed his eyes and made a gesture with his fingers that might've been crossing himself, but it wasn't. It was something else, something almost-older.

Athena and Artemis' eyes widened. He was observant.

He said, "You saw her snip the cord."

"Yeah. So?" But even as I said it, I knew it was a big deal.

"This is not happening," Grover mumbled. He started chewing at his thumb. "I don't want this to be like the last time."

"What last time?"

Thalia groaned "That stupid insufferable satyr." She murmured affectionately.

"Always sixth grade. They never get past sixth."

Thalia turned to Percy and Nico "When we get back remind me to beat him up for blaming himself."

The two nodded wholeheartedly.

"Grover," I said, because he was really starting to scare me. "What are you talking about?"

"Let me walk you home from the bus station. Promise me."

This seemed like a strange request to me, but I promised he could.

"10 drachmas he doesn't keep it." Hercules said. Nico narrowed his eyes at him "Done." Apollo and Hermes grinned at each other "I'm with Percy this time!/I'm against him this time!

Percy privately thought that for the god of prophecy, Apollo was a horrible gambler. He just felt bad for Nico. That was a waste of drachmas.

"Is this like a superstition or something?" I asked.

No answer.

"Grover-that snipping of the yarn. Does that mean somebody is going to die?"

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

"That was the end of the chapter." Theseus said snapping the book shut.

Athena took the book from him "I'll read next." She opened up the book and straightening up in her throne began... **Grover Unexpectedly Loses His Pants**

Chapter End Notes
Chapter two of the story. We haven't really gotten to the plot yet but its beginning. Just look at the minor monologues everyone has. Thanks for reading.
Confession time: I ditched Grover as soon as we got to the bus terminal.

Apollo and Nico’s mouth dropped open and they stared at Percy in shock "B-b-but Percy!" The two exclaimed in surprise.

Hercules and Hermes were grinning as they retrieved the drachmas from their respective better.

Zoë and Artemis rolled their eyes and wondered why everyone was so surprised. He was a boy this was to be expected.

Hermes chuckled "I'm going to be rich from this book."

Apollo and Nico looked at Percy with a mixture of shock and hurt and waited for an explanation. Percy shifted uncomfortably "What?" He defended "If you were there, you'd run out on his face!"

"Yeah, but we're us." The two deadpanned. Percy rolled his eyes "Just read and you'll figure out why."

When looks were cast at Athena, she obliged.

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

"Still blame me?" Percy asked and everyone grimaced while Hermes chuckled. "Why do you think I was against Percy this time?"

Apollo gave Hermes a glare then pouted. "Not fair." He muttered.

Nico gave a sigh and nodded "Okay, I see your point."

Zoë and Artemis were surprised this time around that the boy had admitted he was being rude.

Whenever he got upset, Grover's bladder acted up, so I wasn't surprised when, as soon as we got off the bus, he made me promise to wait for him, then made a beeline for the restroom. Instead of waiting, I got my suitcase, slipped outside, and caught the first taxi uptown.

"East One-hundred-and-fourth and First," I told the driver.

When everyone in the room got a evil look which made Percy shudder, he intervened "Before you people come up with brilliant plans to torture me, first of all this is a couple millennium into the future and secondly I don't even live there anymore."

At the end of his words everyone groaned excluding Nico and Thalia. But those two wouldn't do anything because well… It's sort of obvious.

A word about my mother, before you meet her.
Her name is Sally Jackson and she's the best person in the world,

"Best?" Nico and Thalia scoffed making Percy gape at them. The two gave identical grins "More like perfect, amazing, incredible, fantastic and pure brilliant!" They exclaimed.

The gods were surprised that their future children had come to care for this mortal woman so greatly. Even though they were sure that only Percy was her son.

The Furies were surprised as well since they had figured out who Nico was the son of and they knew for a fact his mortal mother was not this woman.

Hera smiled "Now that is what I call family love." Glancing around at her own family she frowned. Why couldn't her family care for each other like that?

which just proves my theory that the best people have the rottenest luck. Her own parents died in a plane crash when she was five, and she was raised by an uncle who didn't care much about her.

She wanted to be a novelist, so she spent high school working to save enough money for a college with a good creative-writing program. Then her uncle got cancer, and she had to quit school her senior year to take care of him. After he died, she was left with no money, no family, and no diploma.

Athena cut herself off "What's a diploma?" She demanded. Thalia answered "Lady Athena, it's a laurels of sort that people earn when they have had a proper education."

Athena frowned "And this woman, Sally is willing to work hard for one? Does she want one?"

Percy nodded "Yes, she does. Mom is already working hard for it too."

Athena looked at Poseidon in surprise that this woman was his future choice and stated "Well, when she begins to do so, remind my future self and she has my blessing."

Percy beamed, his mother would love that. Unknown to him, his father and Triton both scowled at the idea.

The only good break she ever got was meeting my dad.

Now it was Poseidon's turn to smile, though it annoyed Amphitrite. Triton wasn't too particularly affected.

I don't have any memories of him, just this sort of warm glow, maybe the barest trace of his smile. My mom doesn't like to talk about him because it makes her sad. She has no pictures.

Orion and Theseus shook their heads and patted Percy's shoulders "They never do."

Percy rose a brow and they shrugged. It had seemed like a brotherly thing to do.

See, they weren't married. She told me he was rich and important, and their relationship was a secret. Then one day, he set sail across the Atlantic on some important journey, and he never came back.

Lost at sea, my mom told me. Not dead. Lost at sea.
"Oh that's a good one!" Hermes commented "You know God of the Sea and all. A lie but not a lie. Nice mother Percy!"

"Um thanks?"

She worked odd jobs, took night classes to get her high school diploma, and raised me on her own. She never complained or got mad. Not even once. But I knew I wasn't an easy kid.

Hercules and Ares scoffed "Easy?"

Percy looked at them as if they were stupid "I said I wasn't." That made Athena snort and mutter "Dimwits."

Finally, she married Gabe Ugliano, who was nice the first thirty seconds we knew him, then showed his true colors as a world-class jerk. When I was young, I nicknamed him Smelly Gabe. I'm sorry, but it's the truth. The guy reeked like moldy garlic pizza wrapped in gym shorts.

"EW!" Aphrodite shrieked "That is pure disgusting." She said gagging at the thought.

Artemis and Zoë looked repulsed "I knew the male race was bad, but that man sounds like a pig. Perhaps Circe isn't completely wrong." Artemis murmured.

Between the two of us, we made my mom's life pretty hard. The way Smelly Gabe treated her, the way he and I got along … well, when I came home is a good example.

I walked into our little apartment, hoping my mom would be home from work. Instead, Smelly Gabe was in the living room, playing poker with his buddies. The television blared ESPN. Chips and beer cans were strewn all over the carpet.

Hestia and Dionysus exchanged worried glances and glared at the book. The two were well aware of the difficulties drunks could cause. It was a pain to deal with them, Dionysus' own followers the Maenads came to mind.

Hardly looking up, he said around his cigar, "So, you're home."

"Where's my mom?"

"Working," he said. "You got any cash?"

Theseus look appalled "Seriously? He doesn't even ask you how've you been or what your life has been like?"

That was it. No Welcome back. Good to see you. How has your life been the last six months?

Percy smiled at Theseus who looked surprised.

Gabe had put on weight. He looked like a tuskless walrus in thrift-store clothes. He had about three hairs on his head, all combed over his bald scalp, as if that made him handsome or something.

"Not in his dreams." Aphrodite shuddered "Honestly, it would be a waste of time to even attempt it and I'm the goddess of beauty."
Percy laughed "Can't go lower than that."

"You're laughing?" Hercules questioned "But he's your step-dad?"

Percy looked at him quizzically "Who I call Smelly Gabe?"

Hercules shrugged indifferently.

He managed the Electronics Mega-Mart in Queens, but he stayed home most of the time. I don't know why he hadn't been fired long before. He just kept on collecting paychecks, spending the money on cigars that made me nauseous, and on beer, of course. Always beer. Whenever I was home, he expected me to provide his gambling funds. He called that our "guy secret." Meaning, if I told my mom, he would punch my lights out.

Thalia and Nico's eyes darkened "Where is he now?" The two grit out furious.

Percy smirked mysteriously "Stone-still."

They gave him confused glances though their fists were still clenched.

"I don't have any cash," I told him.

He raised a greasy eyebrow.

Gabe could sniff out money like a bloodhound, which was surprising, since his own smell should've covered up everything else.

Athena silently stored that piece of information away as she read, her eyes narrowing at the extensive description of the mortal's stench.

"You took a taxi from the bus station," he said. Probably paid with a twenty. Got six, seven bucks in change.

"Woah!" Theseus exclaimed "The idiot can do math?"

Percy rolled his eyes "Only cause of his love for poker. That and wasting other people's time made doing basic math learnable."

Orion forced a grin "Learnable? Is that a word?"

Percy nodded "At least according to a daughter of Athena." Eyes went to Athena who shrugged "Words are made all the time, who am I to say what words were invented millennium into the future?"

Somebody expects to live under this roof, he ought to carry his own weight. Am I right, Eddie?"

Eddie, the super of the apartment building, looked at me with a twinge of sympathy. "Come on, Gabe," he said. "The kid just got here."

Persephone smiled "Well at least you have someone on your side."

"Am I right?" Gabe repeated.
Eddie scowled into his bowl of pretzels. The other two guys passed gas in harmony.

The goddesses looked disgusted, Zoë and Artemis muttering about *Men*, and Aphrodite looking as if she was about to faint.

Ares put an arm around her, making Hephaestus glare.

Fortunately the tension was diffused when Demeter spat looking repulsed "They need to eat more bread!"

That set off a series of groans, particularly from Hades, Persephone and the three Furies. Of course when one or two gods *cough Poseidon and Zeus cough* start laughing the rest join in.

"Fine," I said. I dug a wad of dollars out of my pocket and threw the money on the table. "I hope you lose."

Hermes and Dionysus looked at each other and grinned Cheshire cat grins "Consider it done."

"Your report card came, brain boy!" he shouted after me. "I wouldn't act so snooty!"

"Wow what a creative nickname!" Thalia gasped in mock amazement.

"Especially when you, yourself don't have a brain whatsoever!" Nico followed up.

I slammed the door to my room, which really wasn't my room. During school months, it was Gabe's "study."

"Somehow I just know that the word 'study' is being abused in that context." Perseus said with a shake of his head.

He didn't study anything in there except old car magazines, but he loved shoving my stuff in the closet, leaving his muddy boots on my windowsill, and doing his best to make the place smell like his nasty cologne and cigars and stale beer.

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

Nico looked at Percy "And then you wonder why everyone at camp says you have more sarcasm in you than 6 999 999 999 people of the world combined."

Thalia frowned "I thought there were 7 billion people in the world?"

Nico nodded "There are Thals but when you subtract 1 aka Percy from the rest of the population you get 6 999 999 999 people left."

"I know that!" Thalia snapped. "I meant that, that's a lot of sarcasm for one person."

"Oh. Well it's Percy."

"True."

"Hey! I'm right here!"

"We know." The two deadpanned.

Gabe's smell was almost worse than the nightmares about Mrs. Dodds, or the sound of that
old fruit lady's shears snipping the yarn.

But as soon as I thought that, my legs felt weak. I remembered Grover's look of panic-how he'd made me promise I wouldn't go home without him. A sudden chill rolled through me. I felt like someone-something-was looking for me right now, maybe pounding its way up the stairs, growing long, horrible talons.

Then I heard my mom's voice. "Percy?"

She opened the bedroom door, and my fears melted.

Hera looked at Percy with a smile which freaked everyone out "You are a very good boy. Always care about your mother as you do now, alright?"

Percy nervously spoke "Alright?"

My mother can make me feel good just by walking into the room. Her eyes sparkle and change color in the light. Her smile is as warm as a quilt. She's got a few gray streaks mixed in with her long brown hair, but I never think of her as old. When she looks at me, it's like she's seeing all the good things about me, none of the bad. I've never heard her raise her voice or say an unkind word to anyone, not even me or Gabe.

"Holy Zeus that woman's got patience!" Apollo, Nico and Orion exclaimed. Although when Apollo realized he said the same thing as Orion his smile turned upside down.

"Oh, Percy." She hugged me tight. "I can't believe it. You've grown since Christmas!"

Her red-white-and-blue Sweet on America uniform smelled like the best things in the world: chocolate, licorice, and all the other stuff she sold at the candy shop in Grand Central. She'd brought me a huge bag of "free samples," the way she always did when I came home.

"Candy," The three futures went into a daydream.

Hermes stared at Thalia waiting for an explanation. It took her a few minutes to come out of Candyland but when she did and noticed the stares on her, Thalia stammered. "Um candy? Well... I suppose it's like nectar and ambrosia but something that anyone be it mortal, demigod or god can have without blowing up or something like that.

Apollo frowned "Does it taste like nectar and ambrosia?"

Percy spoke up "When we eat nectar and ambrosia we end up comparing it to candy and the likes so I guess... yes?"

Apollo brightened "Candy sounds amazing! What an amazing mom you have and," suddenly his eyes twinkled "That just gave me a brilliant idea for a poem.

Percy, Thalia and Nico looked at each other in horror and nervously waited for the other gods to stop Apollo. Instead...

Candy you are so very sweet

An amazing delicious treat

Natural flavours you enhance
Drizzling in like a dance

You candy truly cannot be beat

The trio had stopped cringing in horror and now looked on in shock. "H-how?" Percy questioned making Thalia shrug. "Well... haikus and limericks are from Japan right?"

Percy and Thalia nodded unsure of where Nico was going with that. "Then maybe the problem is that Japanese poetry doesn't fit Apollo?"

"Nico you are a genius!" the two exclaimed. Nico mock bowed "Thank you, thank you."

"May I read?" Athena glared and everyone nodded.

We sat together on the edge of the bed. While I attacked the blueberry sour strings, she ran her hand through my hair and demanded to know everything I hadn't put in my letters. She didn't mention anything about my getting expelled. She didn't seem to care about that. But was I okay? Was her little boy doing all right?

All the gods excluding the Big Three, Persephone, Demeter, Amphitrite, Triton, Aphrodite, Hestia and Hera sighed "Why can't you be like that?" They asked Hera.

Hera glared at them in return "If you were as good as Percy, then I'll be just a good a mother!"

I told her she was smothering me, and to lay off and all that, but secretly, I was really, really glad to see her.

Zoë frowned at Percy and muttered "What a boy. Doesn't even appreciate what he has."

Percy narrowed his eyes. As much as he respected Zoë he wouldn't tolerate anyone saying he didn't care about his mother. "You wanna say that again?" He challenged her.

Zoë's eyes flared "Absolutely."

Thalia cut in "Stop you two! Zoë, Percy cares about his mother more than anyone. If I didn't know better I would say Percy would even fight Lord Hades for her."

Behind her, Percy silently winced and thought one thing Thalia is going to KILL me!

"And Percy, I know how much you must resent that, but Zoë doesn't know you so give it a break okay?" Thalia finished her monologue.

The two glared at each other before nodding.

From the other room, Gabe yelled, "Hey, Sally-how about some bean dip, huh?"

I gritted my teeth.

My mom is the nicest lady in the world. She should've been married to a millionaire, not to some jerk like Gabe.

"Would a god work?" Hermes teased.

Percy just shook his head "Actually I was being stupid about the millionaire thing too. She deserves someone who would spend time with her and care for her. And there are too many... trust issues
with the gods. No offense."

Zoë looked at him in surprise then turned away. Hercules raised a brow "What's wrong with a millionaire?"

It was Percy's turn to be surprised when he looked at Hercules but answered nonetheless "I have this friend who is a millionaire, and she's barely able to spend any time with her parents whatsoever. In fact she thinks they don't even care about her. That, and with our crazy life with monsters and gods, famous people would be really tricky to handle."

Nico's eyes widened "Woah. I never thought about that! When did you become smart Percy?"

Percy frowned "Ha ha."

For her sake, I tried to sound upbeat about my last days at Yancy Academy. I told her I wasn't too down about the expulsion. I'd lasted almost the whole year this time. I'd made some new friends. I'd done pretty well in Latin. And honestly, the fights hadn't been as bad as the headmaster said. I liked Yancy Academy. I really did. I put such a good spin on the year, I almost convinced myself. I started choking up, thinking about Grover and Mr. Brunner. Even Nancy Bobofit suddenly didn't seem so bad.

Thalia stared at Percy in shock and finally said "You are to never ever try to convince yourself about schools being a happy experience. Absolutely not. You become delusional when you do that."

Percy stared at Thalia back "The keyword was almost."

Thalia shook her head "Still no. 'Almost' is to close to 'for certain.'"

Until that trip to the museum …

"What?" my mom asked. Her eyes tugged at my conscience, trying to pull out the secrets.

"Did something scare you?"

"No, Mom."

I felt bad lying. I wanted to tell her about Mrs. Dodds and the three old ladies with the yarn, but I thought it would sound stupid.

Nico groaned "No, it wouldn't."

Percy stared "Well I know that now! Honestly you do know that you are whining and griping about me when I didn't even know the gods existed?"

Thalia and Nico paused and looked away stammering "Um…er…"

Percy sighed "Forget it."

She pursed her lips. She knew I was holding back, but she didn't push me.

"I have a surprise for you," she said. "We're going to the beach."

My eyes widened. "Montauk?"

"Three nights-same cabin."
"When?"

She smiled. "As soon as I get changed."

I couldn't believe it. My mom and I hadn't been to Montauk the last two summers, because Gabe said there wasn't enough money.

Everyone's eyes darkened "That pig!" Artemis swore

"I'm sure there wasn't. Because he spent it all on his precious poker." Dionysus growled making Percy wide-eyed and left to gape wordlessly.

When Dionysus noticed he asked "What is it Pedro?"

Percy heaved a sigh of relief "Nothing."

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

"Yeah, we did. And we'll take that bean dip and shove it up your—"

"Thalia! Language."

Thalia stared and Nico elaborated "You don't want to hurt the bean dip's feelings."

Thalia smirked "Especially not if Aunt Sally made it," she agreed.

I wanted to punch him,

"DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!" Ares, Thalia, Nico, Artemis, Zoë and some others chanted.

but I met my mom's eyes and I understood she was offering me a deal: be nice to Gabe for a little while. Just until she was ready to leave for Montauk. Then we would get out of here.

"I was on my way, honey," she told Gabe. "We were just talking about the trip."

Gabe's eyes got small. "The trip? You mean you were serious about that?"

"Why? Shouldn't she be?" Needless to say, that there were many people in the room that wanted Gabe dead.

Well except for Hades, Persephone and the Furies. They didn't want the Underworld to be tainted because of Gabe.

Nico was conflicted. Come to the Underworld and receive the worst punishment ever, and then there was the same reasoning as Hades and the other Underworld dwellers.

"I knew it," I muttered. "He won't let us go."

"Try to stop them." Triton muttered. He didn't exactly like Percy or his mother, but he hated people like Gabe.

"Of course he will," my mom said evenly. "Your stepfather is just worried about money. That's all. Besides," she added, "Gabriel won't have to settle for bean dip. I'll make him enough seven-layer dip for the whole weekend. Guacamole. Sour cream. The works."
"This is the first and hopefully last time I'm saying this but... Bribery was completely unneeded. The woman is going to spend time with her son, there's no need for that." Hermes said annoyed.

Gabe softened a bit. "So this money for your trip ... it comes out of your clothes budget, right?"

"Alright! You're going down!" Aphrodite exclaimed looking horrified.

"Yes, honey," my mother said.

"And you won't take my car anywhere but there and back."

"We'll be very careful."

Gabe scratched his double chin. "Maybe if you hurry with that seven-layer dip ... And maybe if the kid apologizes for interrupting my poker game."

"Maybe if we punched you to death?"

Maybe if I kick you in your soft spot, I thought. And make you sing soprano for a week.

The Furies wrote that down furiously. "We'll be sure to use that." Tisiphone told him solemnly.

"Uh...thank you?" Percy asked awkwardly.

But my mom's eyes warned me not to make him mad.

Why did she put up with this guy? I wanted to scream. Why did she care what he thought? Once again Athena's eyes had narrowed thoughtfully and she stored away that piece of information.

"I'm sorry," I muttered. "I'm really sorry I interrupted your incredibly important poker game. Please go back to it right now."

Gabe's eyes narrowed. His tiny brain was probably trying to detect sarcasm in my statement.

"Yeah, whatever," he decided.

Everyone started gagging. "I knew he was stupid," Theseus choked out "but to think anyone could be that stupid..."

He went back to his game.

"Thank you, Percy," my mom said. "Once we get to Montauk, we'll talk more about... whatever you've forgotten to tell me, okay?"

For a moment, I thought I saw anxiety in her eyes-the same fear I'd seen in Grover during the bus ride-as if my mom too felt an odd chill in the air.

Thalia shivered "if you could sense that, why didn't you just tell her?" She yelled at Percy who shrugged.

"I didn't know anything about this world, back then."
But then her smile returned, and I figured I must have been mistaken. She ruffled my hair and went to make Gabe his seven-layer dip.

An hour later we were ready to leave.

Gabe took a break from his poker game long enough to watch me lug my mom's bags to the car. He kept griping and groaning about losing her cooking—and more important, his '78 Camaro—for the whole weekend.

"Who wants to hunt him down and kill him?" Artemis asked her fists clenched.

A wave of hands rose up.

"Not a scratch on this car, brain boy," he warned me as I loaded the last bag. "Not one little scratch."

Like I'd be the one driving. I was twelve. But that didn't matter to Gabe. If a seagull so much as pooped on his paint job, he'd find a way to blame me.

"What? You possessed the seagull?"

"Sure."

Watching him lumber back toward the apartment building, I got so mad I did something I can't explain. As Gabe reached the doorway, I made the hand gesture I'd seen Grover make on the bus, a sort of warding-off-evil gesture, a clawed hand over my heart, then a shoving movement toward Gabe. The screen door slammed shut so hard it whacked him in the butt and sent him flying up the staircase as if he'd been shot from a cannon. Maybe it was just the wind, or some freak accident with the hinges, but I didn't stay long enough to find out.

Stares were thrown at Percy. They all had to admit he was observant, but for a demigod that didn't know anything, he was powerful.

I got in the Camaro and told my mom to step on it.

Our rental cabin was on the south shore, way out at the tip of Long Island. It was a little pastel box with faded curtains, half sunken into the dunes. There was always sand in the sheets and spiders in the cabinets, and most of the time the sea was too cold to swim in.

"Aren't you a son of Poseidon? Does that really bother you?"

I loved the place.

"Of course." Many rolled their eyes at the statement.

We'd been going there since I was a baby. My mom had been going even longer. She never exactly said, but I knew why the beach was special to her. It was the place where she'd met my dad.

Athena started choking her eyes wide. "How did you manage to get a woman, that still loves someone like you but is extremely smart and studious?!" She exclaimed in shock.

Poseidon just stared at Athena then turned away.
As we got closer to Montauk, she seemed to grow younger, years of worry and work disappearing from her face. Her eyes turned the color of the sea.

Amphitrite definitely didn't like the woman, but she could understand why her husband was attracted to her.

We got there at sunset, opened all the cabin's windows, and went through our usual cleaning routine. We walked on the beach, fed blue corn chips to the seagulls, and munched on blue jelly beans, blue saltwater taffy, and all the other free samples my mom had brought from work.

Zeus pouted "That's my colour! Shouldn't you like green?"

Beside him, Hera rolled her eyes at his childishness.

I guess I should explain the blue food.

"Yes, yes you should." Zeus nodded making everyone think one thing 'Are you really the King of the Gods?!

See, Gabe had once told my mom there was no such thing. They had this fight, which seemed like a really small thing at the time. But ever since, my mom went out of her way to eat blue. She baked blue birthday cakes. She mixed blueberry smoothies. She bought blue-corn tortilla chips and brought home blue candy from the shop. This-along with keeping her maiden name, Jackson, rather than calling herself Mrs. Ugliano-was proof that she wasn't totally suckered by Gabe. She did have a rebellious streak, like me.

"I think we have all established that for you it is more than just a streak." Nico told him.

"Well, it would be." Hestia put in. "After all, he does get it from both sides.

When it got dark, we made a fire. We roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. Mom told me stories about when she was a kid, back before her parents died in the plane crash. She told me about the books she wanted to write someday, when she had enough money to quit the candy shop.

Eventually, I got up the nerve to ask about what was always on my mind whenever we came to Montauk-my father. Mom's eyes went all misty. I figured she would tell me the same things she always did, but I never got tired of hearing them.

"He was kind, Percy," she said. "Tall, handsome, and powerful. But gentle, too. You have his black hair, you know, and his green eyes."

They all looked at Percy. It was true. Theseus, Triton and Orion resembled Poseidon as well, but Percy was almost the spitting image of him.

Mom fished a blue jelly bean out of her candy bag. "I wish he could see you, Percy. He would be so proud."

"I am." Poseidon spoke up "And I know that the me that truly knows you is."
Percy gave a half-hearted smile.
I wondered how she could say that. What was so great about me? A dyslexic, hyperactive boy with a D+ report card, kicked out of school for the sixth time in six years.

"Well that's average for all demigods, Perce." Thalia and Nico chorused.

"How old was I?" I asked. "I mean … when he left?"

She watched the flames. "He was only with me for one summer, Percy. Right here at this beach. This cabin."

"But… he knew me as a baby."

"No, honey. He knew I was expecting a baby, but he never saw you. He had to leave before you were born."

Thalia and Nico kept quiet. They knew it was something Percy had to deal with, since they had seen their parents a couple of times afterwards. Though it was in a different form for Thalia.

I tried to square that with the fact that I seemed to remember … something about my father. A warm glow. A smile.

"You did visit him." Amphitrite stated. Poseidon only shrugged "We have no way of knowing."

I had always assumed he knew me as a baby. My mom had never said it outright, but still, I'd felt it must be true. Now, to be told that he'd never even seen me …

I felt angry at my father. Maybe it was stupid, but I resented him for going on that ocean voyage, for not having the guts to marry my mom. He'd left us, and now we were stuck with Smelly Gabe.

Poseidon flinched. He may not have done anything yet, but to be blamed for that sorry excuse of a man's existence in their lives hurt.

"Are you going to send me away again?" I asked her. "To another boarding school?"

She pulled a marshmallow from the fire.

"I don't know, honey." Her voice was heavy. "I think … I think we'll have to do something."

"Because you don't want me around?"

"Why would you say that?" Thalia and Nico looked shocked. Percy could well be the only demigod with a mortal parent who truly loved them.

Percy didn't answer.

I regretted the words as soon as they were out.

My mom's eyes welled with tears. She took my hand, squeezed it tight. "Oh, Percy, no. I-I have to, honey. For your own good. I have to send you away."

Her words reminded me of what Mr. Brunner had said-that it was best for me to leave Yancy.

"Because I'm not normal," I said.
Apollo grinned trying to diffuse the tension "But that's good! If you were normal you wouldn't be the best Cuz ever, right Hermes?"

He gave Hermes a nudge who nodded "Absolutely!"

"You say that as if it's a bad thing, Percy. But you don't realize how important you are. I thought Yancy Academy would be far enough away. I thought you'd finally be safe."

"Safe from what?"

"A bunch of blood-thirsty nasties that want to kill you." Came the unasked nonchalant response,

She met my eyes, and a flood of memories came back to me-all the weird, scary things that had ever happened to me, some of which I'd tried to forget.

During third grade, a man in a black trench coat had stalked me on the playground. When the teachers threatened to call the police, he went away growling, but no one believed me when I told them that under his broad-brimmed hat, the man only had one eye, right in the middle of his head.

"A Cyclops?" Eyes went to Poseidon "Who sends one kid to spy on another kid of your own?"

Poseidon looked uncomfortable "Future activity remember?"

Before that-a really early memory. I was in preschool, and a teacher accidentally put me down for a nap in a cot that a snake had slithered into. My mom screamed when she came to pick me up and found me playing with a limp, scaly rope I'd somehow managed to strangle to death with my meaty toddler hands.

"Hey, just like Hercules isn't it?" Perseus asked.

At that Zoë looked at Percy and Hercules carefully who both shuddered at even the thought of being compared to the other.

In every single school, something creepy had happened, something unsafe, and I was forced to move.

I knew I should tell my mom about the old ladies at the fruit stand, and Mrs. Dodds at the art museum, about my weird hallucination that I had sliced my math teacher into dust with a sword. But I couldn't make myself tell her. I had a strange feeling the news would end our trip to Montauk, and I didn't want that.

"You honestly care more about a stupid trip over thou and thy mother's life? Zoë asked. "You have once again proved how idiotic boys are."

"Hey!" Percy protested. "I got a chance to be around my mother without Gabe, which was a chance I rarely got! So I took it, and besides I didn't know anything about being a demigod okay?!"

"Just like a boy to blame circumstances or something like that than admitting his own faults."

Percy glared at her "Look, you don't know anything about me, so why don't you just give it a rest!"

Zoë glared at him but didn't say a word.
"I've tried to keep you as close to me as I could," my mom said. "They told me that was a mistake. But there's only one other option, Percy-the place your father wanted to send you. And I just... I just can't stand to do it."

"My father wanted me to go to a special school?"

"Not a school," she said softly. "A summer camp."

"Camp Half-Blood!" Thalia cheered. My head was spinning. Why would my dad-who hadn't even stayed around long enough to see me born-talk to my mom about a summer camp? And if it was so important, why hadn't she ever mentioned it before?

"I'm sorry, Percy," she said, seeing the look in my eyes. "But I can't talk about it. I-I couldn't send you to that place. It might mean saying good-bye to you for good."

Percy scoffed "As if. She should have known better than to think I would stay year-round."

Nico nodded "With a mother like her? Definitely."

"For good? But if it's only a summer camp ..."

She turned toward the fire, and I knew from her expression that if I asked her any more questions she would start to cry.

That night I had a vivid dream.

It was storming on the beach, and two beautiful animals, a white horse and a golden eagle, were trying to kill each other at the edge of the surf.

"Zeus and Poseidon." Hestia realized first. Percy nodded "I'm pretty sure, yeah.

The eagle swooped down and slashed the horse's muzzle with its huge talons. The horse reared up and kicked at the eagles wings. As they fought, the ground rumbled, and a monstrous voice chuckled somewhere beneath the earth, goading the animals to fight harder.

"My lord?" Persephone questioned.

I ran toward them, knowing I had to stop them from killing each other, but I was running in slow motion.

Eyes widened and Hades muttered "Please be me, please be me."

I knew I would be too late. I saw the eagle dive down, its beak aimed at the horse's wide eyes, and I screamed, No!

"Ha. I win." Zeus boasted.

Glares were thrown his way "Not the time." Hera hissed.

I woke with a start.

Outside, it really was storming, the kind of storm that cracks trees and blows down houses.
There was no horse or eagle on the beach, just lightning making false daylight, and twenty-foot waves pounding the dunes like artillery.

With the next thunderclap, my mom woke. She sat up, eyes wide, and said, "Hurricane."

I knew that was crazy. Long Island never sees hurricanes this early in the summer. But the ocean seemed to have forgotten. Over the roar of the wind, I heard a distant bellow, an angry, tortured sound that made my hair stand on end.

Then a much closer noise, like mallets in the sand. A desperate voice-someone yelling, pounding on our cabin door.

My mother sprang out of bed in her nightgown and threw open the lock.

Grover stood framed in the doorway against a backdrop of pouring rain. But he wasn't... he wasn't exactly Grover.

Stares were thrown at Percy. "What do you mean?" Orion asked.

Percy just gestured towards the book, making many groan.

"Searching all night," he gasped. "What were you thinking?"

My mother looked at me in terror—not scared of Grover, but of why he'd come.

"Percy," she said, shouting to be heard over the rain. "What happened at school? What didn't you tell me?"

I was frozen, looking at Grover. I couldn't understand what I was seeing.

"O Zeu kai alloi theoi!"

"By Zeus and all the other gods!" Athena translated.

he yelled. "It's right behind me! Didn't you tell her?"

I was too shocked to register that he'd just cursed in Ancient Greek, and I'd understood him perfectly. I was too shocked to wonder how Grover had gotten here by himself in the middle of the night. Because Grover didn't have his pants on—and where his legs should be … where his legs should be …

My mom looked at me sternly and talked in a tone she'd never used before: "Percy. Tell me now!"

I stammered something about the old ladies at the fruit stand, and Mrs. Dodds, and my mom stared at me, her face deathly pale in the flashes of lightning.

She grabbed her purse, tossed me my rain jacket, and said, "Get to the car. Both of you. Go!"

Grover ran for the Camaro—but he wasn't running, exactly. He was trotting, shaking his shaggy hindquarters, and suddenly his story about a muscular disorder in his legs made sense to me. I understood how he could run so fast and still limp when he walked.
Because where his feet should be, there were no feet. There were cloven hooves.

Hermes laughed "You just found out that he's a satyr. Hope you didn't call him a donkey."

At Percy's expression, he began to laugh harder.

"Well that was the end of the chapter," Athena told them. "Who wants to read next?"

Before anyone could step up there was a golden flash, and in place of Percy there was a note. Orion picked it up and read:

_Dear Gods and Demigods,_

_Sorry about Percy. A very important goddess needed his assistance so we had to give him back. We'll bring Percy back soon enough however from a different timeline. Please continue to read until then!"

_Sincerely,_

_The Fates, Amazing Apollo and Heroic Hermes_

"Well than, looks like we won't be seeing Percy for a bit." Hercules said.

"Yeah." Nico nodded "Let's keep going."

Amphitrite extended a hand and the book flew into it. "I shall read… **My Mother Teaches Me Bullfighting.**

Chapter End Notes

So yeah. Hercules is a bit of a douchebag. And everyone hates him, especially since Hera and Zoë are both there. Can't be helped. It may get better though. Maybe. Depends, what do you guys want?

Percy's disappearance is due to Hera meddling. We all know why. Hint, Heroes of Olympus. Don't worry we'll have him back soon enough.
Sorry for the late update. Hope you all like the next chapter!

We tore through the night along dark country roads. Wind slammed against the Camaro. Rain lashed the windshield. I didn't know how my mom could see anything, but she kept her foot on the gas.

Thalia laughed. "He makes it sound as if they're in a horror film."

"A horror what?" Hermes asked incredulously.

"Its... a sort of a scary moving picture that mortals developed?" Thalia shrugged.

It was quite hard to explain things that happened in the future to the people of the past.

Every time there was a flash of lightning, I looked at Grover sitting next to me in the backseat and I wondered if I'd gone insane, or if he was wearing some kind of shag-carpet pants.

"Shag-car-what?" Theseus frowned ignoring the glare Amphitrite gave him for interrupting her.

Nico and Thalia paused from their hysterical laughter.

"Um...er..." Nico stammered.

"Let's just say, Percy has weird thoughts and not think too much about them. Sorry, but I don't know how to explain all this stuff."

The gods and demigods of the past glanced at each other and shrugged realizing there was no way to be able to know all of that.

But, no, the smell was one I remembered from kindergarten field trips to the petting zoo. The smell of a wet barnyard animal.

"Oh! Please tell me he didn't say that to Grover." Thalia roared with laughter having to gasp for breath.

"I don't know Thals. I don't know." Nico could only shake his head.

All I could think to say was, "So, you and my mom... know each other?"

Graver's eyes flitted to the rearview mirror, though there were no cars behind us. "Not exactly," he said. "I mean, we've never met in person. But she knew I was watching you."

"His mother was in on a goat stalking her son?" Apollo laughed.

"He's a satyr." Hermes said dryly though it was obvious he was quite amused.
"Watching me?"

"Keeping tabs on you. Making sure you were okay. But I wasn't faking being your friend," he added hastily. "I am your friend."

"Can't help but need the confirmation." Orion shrugged.

That line brought upon a bunch of giggles.

Apollo however glared in anger.

"Urn ... what are you, exactly?"

"That doesn't matter right now."

"It doesn't matter? From the waist down, my best friend is a donkey - "

"Oh no he didn't!" Hermes laughed. "Pan's told me about satyrs who would trample people under hoof for saying that."

Zoë perked up "Really, Lord Hermes?"

"Yeah. Why?" Hermes said until he saw the wicked look that had formed on her and Artemis' faces and the look of 'For our sake shut up!' from all the other men that he realized that he had committed a grave error.

"N-no! I meant he was joking of course. Forget about that right now!" He tried to cover up, but it was too late their wicked looks had transformed into evil smirks with mischievous glints in their eyes.

All the men in the room paled and hoped they never did anything to offend Artemis and her huntresses.

They all knew the infatuation satyrs had with the goddess of the Hunt.

Grover let out a sharp, throaty "Blaa-ha-ha!"

I'd heard him make that sound before, but I'd always assumed it was a nervous laugh. Now I realized it was more of an irritated bleat.

The look was still there.

It was the men in the room that were giving the nervous laughs.

No one noticed but Nico had slyly scooted away from Thalia who was giving him the worst evil look of all with happiness radiating from her face. Her punk clothes did not help reassure his safety.

"Goat!" he cried.

"What?"

"I'm a goat from the waist down."

"You just said it didn't matter."

Persephone feeling the slightest pity decided to move the conversation to a new point of topic.
"He really should stop arguing about that."

That made them all break out of their stupor and giving various expressions.

Hermes winced sympathetically, others felt sorry for Percy, others were curious, others were amused and the rest just didn't care.

"Blaa-ha-ha! There are satyrs who would trample you underhoof for such an insult!"

The attempt was futile. The look was back on.

"Whoa. Wait. Satyrs. You mean like ... Mr. Brunner's myths?"

"Were those old ladies at the fruit stand a myth, Percy? Was Mrs. Dodds a myth?"

"Bah. Of course not." Zeus said puffing out his chest in pride.

The others rolled their eyes and snickered at his childishness.

"He most definitely just looked the most like a rock." Poseidon and Hades whispered to their respective wife feeling sorry that they were related to Zeus.

Said wives, muffled their laughter. Especially Amphitrite as she was the one reading.

"So you admit there was a Mrs. Dodds!"

"Is he always this...off topic?"

"Yup."

"Of course."

"Then why - "

"The less you knew, the fewer monsters you'd attract," Grover said, like that should be perfectly obvious. "We put Mist over the humans' eyes. We hoped you'd think the Kindly One was a hallucination. But it was no good. You started to realize who you are."

"Who you are!" Thalia and Nico sang loudly making everyone cringe.

Especially Apollo.

"Who I - wait a minute, what do you mean?"

The weird bellowing noise rose up again somewhere behind us, closer than before. Whatever was chasing us was still on our trail.

"Dun, Dun, DUN!" Orion said trying to lighten the atmosphere. It worked though Artemis did begin to give him weird looks.

Well he couldn't have everything.

"Percy," my mom said, "there's too much to explain and not enough time. We have to get you to safety."
"Safety from what? Who's after me?"

"Oh, nobody much," Grover said, obviously still miffed about the donkey comment.

Hermes laughed. "They always are. Just give them a couple of days. If they aren't the type to hold grudges you'll be forgiven. Right D?"

Dionysus gave him an evil glare for the nickname and stubbornly nodded.

"Thanks!" Hermes said painfully oblivious to the fact that Dionysus’ age was only being controlled by Ariadne's presence.

"Just the Lord of the Dead and a few of his blood-thirstiest minions."

"Why would I, spend my precious time on my brother's spawn?" Hades asked.

Nico and Thalia exchanged looks. "It's er…um actually….It's in the books!"

"Grover!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Jackson. Could you drive faster, please?"

I tried to wrap my mind around what was happening, but I couldn't do it. I knew this wasn't a dream. I had no imagination. I could never dream up something this weird.

"LIES!" The future demigods shouted making everyone jump.

"There is no one in the world with more imagination than Percy."

"Exactly." Thalia agreed. "He comes up with the weirdest stuff. That is nothing."

"Maybe being in a life or death situation causes people to gain imagination?" Perseus suggested quietly.

They all went into deep thought but when neither Athena nor Theseus offered any input they accepted the claim.

My mom made a hard left. We swerved onto a narrower road, racing past darkened farmhouses and wooded hills and PICK YOUR OWN STRAWBERRIES signs on white picket fences.

"Strawberries," Demeter smiled "I should grow some. It's just about as good for you as bread is!"

The Underworld dwellers rolled their eyes in frustration.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Somewhere safe." Came the immediate reply, neither of the two future demigods really liking camp.

"The summer camp I told you about." My mother's voice was tight; she was trying for my sake not to be scared. "The place your father wanted to send you."

Thalia glanced at Poseidon then looking at Zeus wished for a moment her father could have cared for her like that. And that her mom wasn't such a horrible mother.
"The place you didn't want me to go."

"Of course she didn't! No mother wants to let her child go. Even though some people are just too
determined to snatch them away from you." Demeter said glaring at Hades at the last part.

"Please, dear," my mother begged. "This is hard enough. Try to understand. You're in
danger."

"Because some old ladies cut yarn."

"Those weren't old ladies, sea spawn." Athena said annoyed.

All the children of Poseidon and Poseidon himself looked at the wisdom goddess in irritation and
anger.

"Those weren't old ladies," Grover said. "Those were the Fates. Do you know what it means -
the fact they appeared in front of you? They only do that when you're about to ... when
someone's about to die."

"Grover!" Came a groan.

"Whoa. You said 'you.'"

"Of course he caught that." Thalia said bitterly.

"No I didn't. I said 'someone.'"

"You meant 'you.' As in me."

"I meant you, like 'someone.' Not you, you."

"Boys. Arguing at a time like this." Artemis said only mildly annoyed. That surprised her. She
usually didn't care for any boy but Orion and her brother Apollo.

"Boys!" my mom said.

Zoë smiled at that.

She pulled the wheel hard to the right, and I got a glimpse of a figure she'd swerved to avoid -
a dark fluttering shape now lost behind us in the storm.

"What monster could be after them?" Hestia wondered getting worried now.

"What was that?" I asked.

"It's like he read your mind Hestia." Hades smiled.

"We're almost there," my mother said, ignoring my question. "Another mile. Please. Please. Please."

Orion surprisingly found himself chanting the same thing. His half-brother had started to grow on
him. In fact Percy reminded Orion of himself the way he didn't really fit in with everyone.

I didn't know where there was, but I found myself leaning forward in the car, anticipating,
wanting us to arrive.

"You should." Perseus said feeling bad for his namesake.

Outside, nothing but rain and darkness - the kind of empty countryside you get way out on the tip of Long Island. I thought about Mrs. Dodds and the moment when she'd changed into the thing with pointed teeth and leathery wings. My limbs went numb from delayed shock. She really hadn't been human. She'd meant to kill me.

"Now he realizes it?" Athena shook her head in disgust. "Just when I thought the boy couldn't get any stupider."

Triton glared at Athena, "Shut up. He's new to this world, and they were trying to make sure he didn't realize it. No one asked for your opinion so just keep your mouth shut!"

Athena was hurt, but she masked it and nodded glowering.

Of course everyone knew that Triton hadn't defended Percy because the demigod had started to grow on him, but the immense hate he had for Athena.

Well everyone but the future demigods that is who were extremely confused at Triton's attitude.

Then I thought about Mr. Brunner ... and the sword he had thrown me. Before I could ask Grover about that, the hair rose on the back of my neck. There was a blinding flash, a jaw-rattling boom!, and our car exploded.

They all glared at Zeus who swallowed. "What? Future remember?! We talked about this!"

Slowly they stopped all promising a world of pain less anything happened to Percy, his mother Sally or Grover.

I remember feeling weightless, like I was being crushed, fried, and hosed down all at the same time.

Zeus could almost see the horrible fate that lay ahead of him and hoped desperately that nothing happened to the boy.

I peeled my forehead off the back of the driver's seat and said, "Ow."

Thalia and Nico smiled. That was so Percy.

"Percy!" my mom shouted.

"I'm okay..."

"He better be." Hera said shocking everyone. Hera hated demigods. That was a fact! So how?...

I tried to shake off the daze. I wasn't dead.

"No you aren't." Hades agreed making Persephone giggle slightly.

The Furies smiled at their master and mistress.

Nico inwardly gagged while Thalia held back a laugh.
The car hadn't really exploded. We'd swerved into a ditch. Our driver's-side doors were wedged in the mud. The roof had cracked open like an eggshell and rain was pouring in.

Cue the glares at Zeus. The Lord of the Sky was looking away and trying to make himself look scary. It wasn't working too well.

Maybe he shouldn't have used that look, every time he wanted something done.

Lightning.

More glaring. Even from his own wife. The Queen of the Heavens hated demigods though!

That was the only explanation. We'd been blasted right off the road. Next to me in the backseat was a big motionless lump. "Grover!"

Dionysus mildly tensed. After all his own best friend was a satyr.

He was slumped over, blood trickling from the side of his mouth. I shook his furry hip, thinking, No! Even if you are half barnyard animal, you're my best friend and I don't want you to die!

"That's kind? I shall think?" Zoë seemed to ask Artemis confused and slightly suspicious.

Artemis nodded "For a boy, that is the most to be expected."


Then he groaned "Food," and I knew there was hope.

Hermes burst out laughing. "Pan does the same thing!"

"Percy," my mother said, "we have to ..." Her voice faltered.

I looked back. In a flash of lightning, through the mud-spattered rear windshield, I saw a figure lumbering toward us on the shoulder of the road.

They all sat up, the tension obvious.

The sight of it made my skin crawl. It was a dark silhouette of a huge guy, like a football player. He seemed to be holding a blanket over his head. His top half was bulky and fuzzy. His upraised hands made it look like he had horns.

Theseus frowned seeming to recall something. That description sounded awfully familiar.

I swallowed hard. "Who is - "

"Percy," my mother said, deadly serious. "Get out of the car."

"Listen to her." Nico plead silently.

My mother threw herself against the driver's-side door. It was jammed shut in the mud. I tried mine. Stuck too. I looked up desperately at the hole in the roof. It might've been an exit, but the edges were sizzling and smoking.
Zeus. The god was startled to see his siblings, nephews, nieces and children go against him for a demigod. Him!

They were risking their lives to show their disapproval. Zeus sulked. What made Poseidon's kid so special?

"Climb out the passenger's side!" my mother told me. "Percy - you have to run. Do you see that big tree?"

"Me." Thalia sing-songed ignoring the weird looks the others sent her.

"What?"

Another flash of lightning, and through the smoking hole in the roof I saw the tree she meant: a huge, White House Christmas tree-sized pine at the crest of the nearest hill.

"Christmas is amazing isn't it?" She said giddily trying to break the tense atmosphere.

Nico stared at her as if to say *Thalia you're stupid.*

"That's the property line," my mom said. "Get over that hill and you'll see a big farmhouse down in the valley. Run and don't look back. Yell for help. Don't stop until you reach the door."

"Mom, you're coming too."

"Loyal." Athena noted. "Almost to a fault."

Unknowing to rest of the group, Thalia and Nico flinched at her words.

*Her face was pale, her eyes as sad as when she looked at the ocean.*

Amphitrite took a pause from her reading to glance at her husband.

That must've been what attracted him to her. The mortal woman.

"No!" I shouted. "You are coming with me. Help me carry Grover."

"Food!" Grover moaned, a little louder.

"Shut up satyr! Do you want to be killed?" Triton groaned.

"Hey! Don't be mean to satyrs!" Hermes and Dionysus simultaneously snarled fiercely.

Blinking in surprise, they shot each other grudging looks of acceptance.

*The man with the blanket on his head kept coming toward us, making his grunting, snorting noises. As he got closer, I realized he couldn't be holding a blanket over his head, because his hands - huge meaty hands - were swinging at his sides. There was no blanket. Meaning the bulky, fuzzy mass that was too big to be his head ... was his head. And the points that looked like horns ...*

Theseus' eyes widened and his breathing became shallow.

Meanwhile Ariadne clung to Dionysus' arm and started shaking slightly.
Dionysus looked at his wife in alarm and reviewed mentally what had just been said.

Oh. He realized the situation instantly as he began to subtly comfort Ariadne. Even if he disliked the fact she was worrying over another stupid of Poseidon.

"He doesn't want us," my mother told me. "He wants you. Besides, I can't cross the property line."

"That's unfair isn't it?" Hestia questioned. "The mortal parents are put in such grave danger because of that."

Zeus frowned. "Maybe we should build them a place where they can hide once the demigod has reached the safety of camp?"

"I agree."

"I agree." Athena said. "But how about we properly discuss it after we finish the books?" She proposed.

Thalia and Nico exchanged grins. Maybe, just maybe the gods could become kinder.

"But..."

"We don't have time, Percy. Go. Please."

I got mad, then - mad at my mother,

"Oh don't do that!" Demeter cried feeling quite sympathetic at that moment.

at Grover the goat,

"Don't be mad at him. He'll end up saving your life in the future." Apollo scolded the book.

"Really?" Hermes asked in surprise.

"Uh huh." Apollo answered certain he was correct.

at the thing with horns that was lumbering toward us slowly and deliberately like, like a bull.

"Now that you can be mad at." Ares grinned waiting for an interesting fight to come.

I climbed across Grover and pushed the door open into the rain. "We're going together. Come on, Mom."

"I told you -"

"Mom! I am not leaving you. Help me with Grover."

Hestia smiled despite the tension. Never had she even heard of a hero so loyal and caring. This was what it truly meant to be heroic. To be strong but never forget the hearth. This boy would have her favor.

I didn't wait for her answer. I scrambled outside, dragging Grover from the car. He was surprisingly light, but I couldn't have carried him very far if my mom hadn't come to my aid.

Zoë looked up. A man had acknowledged the strength of a woman of his own free will? Were the gods still ruling the cosmos?
A glance at her lady Artemis told Zoë, she wasn't alone in those thoughts.

Together, we draped Grover’s arms over our shoulders and started stumbling uphill through wet waist-high grass.

"Why is it so long? Wouldn't that make it harder for the demigods to reach safety?" Perseus asked starting to worry for his successors in the demigod world.

"That's…a good point." Hermes said. "However…" They glanced at Zeus.

"We'll come up with a solution for it later." He grumbled.

Glancing back, I got my first clear look at the monster.

Theseus took in a deep breath, attracting attention from Dionysus.

Looking at his own hand, which was clenched by Ariadne the wine god frowned. Despite the fact that he hated his wife having anything to do with that no-good, lousy son of his uncle, even he was curious as to how the younger upstart would survive.

He was seven feet tall, easy, his arms and legs like something from the cover of Muscle Man magazine - bulging biceps and triceps and a bunch of other 'ceps, all stuffed like baseballs under vein-webbed skin.

"H-how does Percy have the ability to make a joke like that, in those circumstances?" Nico asked shakily taking in a deep breath.

The Furies glanced at Nico silently wondering why the child of their lord would care about a child of the sea god.

He wore no clothes except underwear - I mean, bright white Fruit of the Looms

"Because he's an idiot." Thalia muttered her eyes wide in fear for the boy she had come to love as a brother.

which would've looked funny, except that the top half of his body was so scary. Coarse brown hair started at about his belly button and got thicker as it reached his shoulders.

His neck was a mass of muscle and fur leading up to his enormous head, which had a snout as long as my arm, snotty nostrils with a gleaming brass ring, cruel black eyes, and horns - enormous black-and-white horns with points you just couldn't get from an electric sharpener.

The gods and Thalia jolted in shock realizing just what this particular monster was.

Athena glanced at Dionysus and mentally glared realizing the wine god had figured it out before her. The wisdom goddess was bested by a god of wine and madness? This was unforgivable.

I recognized the monster, all right. He had been in one of the first stories Mr. Brunner told us. But he couldn't be real.

"But he is." Theseus moaned.

Nico frowned not realizing just who it was. He glanced at the Furies and Tisiphone slyly mouthed to him, 'The Minotaur.'
Nico went pale in fear for Percy. And the boy was already so pale naturally too.

I blinked the rain out of my eyes. "That's -"

"Pasiphae's son,"

"Smart woman." Hercules complimented.

The hero was met by glares from many for just speaking. Like Hades for taking Cerberus, Artemis, Thalia and Zoë for Zoë, Hera for being Zeus' son and that he killed his wife and so many more.

Orion and Perseus recoiled realizing how bad the situation was for Percy Jackson, being the only ones to not realize this before.

my mother said. "I wish I'd known how badly they want to kill you."

"But he's the Min -"

"Don't say his name," she warned. "Names have power."

Hera looked over at the demigods kindly. "Is this woman happy in your time? She's quite kind and clever."

Thalia and Nico tried not to quiver in fear of Hera's smile and hesitantly nodded. "She's happily married to a really nice guy now."

"Good." Hera's smile became ten times brighter, only making her scarier.

Unbeknownst to anyone but the other gods, Hera had been checking if the woman were contest for Zeus' affection.

The pine tree was still way too far - a hundred yards uphill at least.

"If I could move Percy, I would." Thalia muttered under her breath.

I glanced behind me again.

The bull-man hunched over our car, looking in the windows - or not looking, exactly. More like snuffling, nuzzling. I wasn't sure why he bothered, since we were only about fifty feet away.

"Food?" Grover moaned.

"Shhh," I told him. "Mom, what's he doing? Doesn't he see us?"

"Like all monsters, his sight and hearing are terrible. He goes by scent. Follow the wind's direction. Don't make it easy for him." Theseus came out of depression enough to say a quick warning.

"His sight and hearing are terrible," she said. "He goes by smell. But he'll figure out where we are soon enough."

Sly looks of curiosity passed among some, but it was quickly ignored.

Particularly due to the glare Dionysus was giving everyone who listened to the erudite son of Poseidon.
As if on cue, the bull-man bellowed in rage. He picked up Gabe's Camaro by the torn roof, the chassis creaking and groaning. He raised the car over his head and threw it down the road. It slammed into the wet asphalt and skidded in a shower of sparks for about half a mile before coming to a stop. The gas tank exploded.

Not a scratch, I remembered Gabe saying.

That sentence made them snap out of their gloomy mood. There wasn't a single soul in that throne room that didn't chuckle darkly and mutter "Oops," wickedly.

Oops.

Devious laughter filled the room. Hestia was a little hesitant but her entire family was agreeing on this so it couldn't be all bad.

"Percy," my mom said. "When he sees us, he'll charge. Wait until the last second, then jump out of the way - directly sideways. He can't change directions very well once he's charging. Do you understand?"

"Where did this woman learn to fight?" Perseus asked impressed. After all it wasn't often that a mortal knew how to handle the monsters that tormented them.

Zoë looked up to give a scathing remark but Thalia cut her off. "She cared for her son. So she found out. How? We don't know."

Perseus nodded and that was that.

"How do you know all this?"

Perseus blinked at the similarity between his namesake and himself, but kept quiet.

"I've been worried about an attack for a long time. I should have expected this. I was selfish, keeping you near me."

Demeter shook her head mournfully. "That's not selfish. A mother shouldn't have to give up her child." The last part was directed towards Hades with a glare.

Surprisingly Persephone spoke up. "However a mother should know when the child should be allowed to spread her wings and fly!"

Demeter's eyes widened and she opened her mouth to argue. Before she could utter a word though Zeus cut in booming "ENOUGH."

"Keeping me near you? But - "

Another bellow of rage, and the bull-man started tromping uphill.

He'd smelled us.

Any humor and relaxation that had developed in the room all vanished.

The pine tree was only a few more yards, but the hill was getting steeper and slicker, and Grover wasn't getting any lighter.
Thalia drew in a frustrated breath. This sounded just like her first time getting to camp. But Percy survived! Even so, she was so scared for him.

The bull-man closed in. Another few seconds and he'd be on top of us.

Nico was mentally hyperventilating. Percy. Percy. Percy. That was the only thing he could think of.

My mother must've been exhausted, but she shouldered Grover. "Go, Percy! Separate! Remember what I said."

I didn't want to split up, but I had the feeling she was right

"She is right. It's your only chance of survival." Zoë rolled her eyes.

– it was our only chance.

Artemis gave her lieutenant a strange look. A boy was acting intelligent, by listening to another as well as giving credit. It seemed otherworldly. It was obvious Zoë felt the same way.

I sprinted to the left, turned, and saw the creature bearing down on me. His black eyes glowed with hate. He reeked like rotten meat.

"He hasn't changed." Theseus whispered only making everyone more tensed.

He lowered his head and charged, those razor-sharp horns aimed straight at my chest.

"Why is he so observant?" Demeter demanded looking sick.

The fear in my stomach made me want to bolt, but that wouldn't work. I could never outrun this thing. So I held my ground, and at the last moment, I jumped to the side.

They all took in a breath of relief. But it was too soon to celebrate.

The bull-man stormed past like a freight train, then bellowed with frustration and turned, but not toward me this time, toward my mother, who was setting Grover down in the grass.

"No!" Came the collective cry from Nico and Thalia.

We'd reached the crest of the hill. Down the other side I could see a valley, just as my mother had said, and the lights of a farmhouse glowing yellow through the rain. But that was half a mile away. We'd never make it.

"Be optimistic!" Orion scolded truly worrying for a half brother he only really knew from reading what four chapters of a book? Even so it felt like he knew this boy for a lifetime.

The bull-man grunted, pawing the ground. He kept eyeing my mother, who was now retreating slowly downhill, back toward the road, trying to lead the monster away from Grover.

"Run, Percy!" she told me. "I can't go any farther. Run!"

But I just stood there, frozen in fear, as the monster charged her.

"Fool of a boy!" Zoë snapped. Nico and Thalia glared at her, but Artemis recognized it as worry for
the woman. The maiden goddess faintly smiled at her lieutenant before getting anxious herself.

She tried to sidestep, as she’d told me to do, but the monster had learned his lesson. His hand shot out and grabbed her by the neck as she tried to get away. He lifted her as she struggled, kicking and pummeling the air.

"MS. JACKSON!" Came the horrified cry from the two children who had adopted the woman as a mother like figure.

"Mom!"

She caught my eyes, managed to choke out one last word: "Go!"

"She truly cares for her son." Demeter said choking back tears. Persephone looked at her mother in shock before hesitantly patting her shoulder trying to be comforting.

Then, with an angry roar, the monster closed his fists around my mother's neck, and she dissolved before my eyes, melting into light, a shimmering golden form, as if she were a holographic projection. A blinding flash, and she was simply ... gone.

Persephone took her hand back as if it were on fire. She and the Furies glanced at Hades so quickly, that if anyone were trying to they could have seen the whiplash.

Nico on the other hand didn't notice both the looks or the words that were uttered.

"No!"

Anger replaced my fear. Newfound strength burned in my limbs - the same rush of energy I'd gotten when Mrs. Dodds grew talons.

"A real mother-son relationship." Hera said. "Bless that woman. She knows true familial love." The goddess leaned her head on her husband's shoulder feeling for the first time in her immortal life, sympathetic for a mortal woman.

The bull-man bore down on Grover, who lay helpless in the grass. The monster hunched over, snuffling my best friend, as if he were about to lift Grover up and make him dissolve too.

Thalia clenched her fist. If she ever saw that Minotaur it would pay. But she knew Sally! This was Percy's first time at camp! Could something like what happened to her have happened to Sally?

She glanced at Nico who looked too shocked to reply. Thalia would just have to talk to him later then.

I couldn't allow that.

I stripped off my red rain jacket.

"Is that an omen? He was wearing red and the Minotaur is part bull…” Athena began when Ariadne cut her off.

"No one is looking for your theories right now Athena!"

The wisdom goddess was so shocked she didn't even try to get a word in edgewise.
"Hey!" I screamed, waving the jacket, running to one side of the monster. "Hey, stupid! Ground beef!"

"B-bad insults." Hermes said though his heart wasn't in it.

"Raaaarrrrrrr!" The monster turned toward me, shaking his meaty fists.

I had an idea - a stupid idea, but better than no idea at all.

Perseus gave a bittersweet smile "Stupid ideas are sometimes the life saving ideas."

I put my back to the big pine tree and waved my red jacket in front of the bull-man, thinking I'd jump out of the way at the last moment.

Theseus' eyes widened "That's crazy talk! It's impossible!"

He turned to Thalia. "I know he survives but how? External help?"

The girl numbly shook her head indicating she didn't know.

But it didn't happen like that.

Triton unconsciously leaned forward. He had suddenly gotten excited about what was to come.

The bull-man charged too fast, his arms out to grab me whichever way I tried to dodge.

Time slowed down.

Thalia and Nico snapped out of their depression for just a moment.

Was that foreshadowing or was there an external force interfering like what Theseus had suggested?

My legs tensed. I couldn't jump sideways, so I leaped straight up, kicking off from the creature's head, using it as a springboard, turning in midair, and landing on his neck.

"What? How?!" Theseus and Hercules exclaimed at the same time.

They all glanced at Hercules first. The boy scrambled to explain himself. "Wouldn't that take years of training to accomplish? For someone untrained and running purely on emotions….it's a feat unheard of."

Some accepted it. Hercules did have some of the most experience in fighting. Others glared just because it was Hercules that voiced it.

Then it was Theseus' turn to explain.

"When I fought the Minotaur, you barely had time to move. So like what Hercules said, that move was remarkable."

"I agree." Ariadne said quietly, for she too had seen the Minotaur in person.

How did I do that? I didn't have time to figure it out. A millisecond later, the monster's head slammed into the tree and the impact nearly knocked my teeth out.

Thalia winced. To think it had been her fault that he got hurt, while he was protecting Grover.
The bull-man staggered around, trying to shake me. I locked my arms around his horns to keep from being thrown. Thunder and lightning were still going strong. The rain was in my eyes. The smell of rotten meat burned my nostrils.

"Why is everything against him?" Poseidon said in anguish for the son that had not yet come to being but had already become important to the sea god.

The monster shook himself around and bucked like a rodeo bull. He should have just backed up into the tree and smashed me flat, but I was starting to realize that this thing had only one gear: forward.

"Smart theory." Athena rolled her eyes and was surprised when everyone looked at her murderously.

Meanwhile, Grover started groaning in the grass. I wanted to yell at him to shut up, but the way I was getting tossed around, if I opened my mouth I'd bite my own tongue off.

"Food!" Grover moaned.

"Satyrs!" Dionysus and Hermes snapped simultaneously. Then the two looked at each other with shocked and horrified expressions. Once it was alright. Twice it just got creepy.

The bull-man wheeled toward him, pawed the ground again, and got ready to charge. I thought about how he had squeezed the life out of my mother, made her disappear in a flash of light, and rage filled me like high-octane fuel. I got both hands around one horn and I pulled backward with all my might. The monster tensed, gave a surprised grunt, then - snap!

"Rage truly is the best weapon in a fight." Ares grinned.

The others utterly shocked at the display of power nodded lifelessly.

The bull-man screamed and flung me through the air. I landed flat on my back in the grass. My head smacked against a rock. When I sat up, my vision was blurry, but I had a horn in my hands, a ragged bone weapon the size of a knife.

"So that's how he got it." Nico spoke in a voice filled with reverence "I had always wondered."

"Yeah." Came Thalia's coarse reply.

The monster charged.

Without thinking, I rolled to one side and came up kneeling. As the monster barreled past, I drove the broken horn straight into his side, right up under his furry rib cage.

Slowly Ares began to clap many others joining in. Victories against a Fury and then the Minotaur for an untrained demigod were indeed impressive.

The bull-man roared in agony. He flailed, clawing at his chest, then began to disintegrate - not like my mother, in a flash of golden light, but like crumbling sand, blown away in chunks by the wind, the same way Mrs. Dodds had burst apart.

"Sent back to Tartarus." Triton murmured.

Alecto was frowning but she decided that now was not the time to complain, seeing as how her
Lord was in a unhappy mood.

The monster was gone.

"Thank god." Theseus sighed in relief finally able to take a breath of peace.

The rain had stopped. The storm still rumbled, but only in the distance. I smelted like livestock and my knees were shaking. My head felt like it was splitting open.

Zeus winced remembering Athena's birth. "I know how he feels." The mighty god muttered rubbing his own head.

I was weak and scared and trembling with grief I'd just seen my mother vanish. I wanted to lie down and cry,

"Poor boy." Ariadne said, truly feeling sorry for the hero who cared about others.

but there was Grover, needing my help, so I managed to haul him up and stagger down into the valley, toward the lights of the farmhouse. I was crying, calling for my mother, but I held on to Grover - I wasn't going to let him go.

"A true hero." Hestia spoke and they all nodded for once being unable to argue. Even the other demigods agreed.

The last thing I remember is collapsing on a wooden porch, looking up at a ceiling fan circling above me, moths flying around a yellow light, and the stern faces of a familiar-looking bearded man and a pretty girl, her blond hair curled like a princess's. They both looked down at me, and the girl said, "He's the one. He must be."

Attempting a joke Aphrodite spoke "The one? There must be something special there."

The joke fell flat.


"Silence, Annabeth,"

Remembering Aphrodite's joke, Nico's face fell even more, if that were possible.


Very, very softly Amphitrite closed the book. With a somber expression she announced that that was the end of the chapter.

They all looked extremely troubled from the events of the chapter.

Hera adopted a motherly expression, an expression that came rarely on her immortal face. "Shall we continue?"

The reply was immediate "Yes!"

Hercules got up and took the book. "How about I read?"

Everyone shrugged. It was a good deal. Those who dislike Hercules could glare at him in pretense
they disliked what was happening in the book. The others who didn't care about him were also fine with it. Hercules didn't talk much anyways.

Hercules sighed and opened the book to the correct page... I Play Pinochle With A Horse
I had weird dreams full of barnyard animals. Most of them wanted to kill me. The rest wanted food.

"The satyr has such an influence." Demeter mused, a little disdain in her voice.

I must've woken up several times, but what I heard and saw made no sense, so I just passed out again.

Artemis rolled her eyes and her lieutenant whispered, "What a boy."

I remember lying in a soft bed, being spoon-fed something that tasted like buttered popcorn, only it was pudding. The girl with curly blond hair hovered over me, smirking as she scraped drips off my chin with the spoon.

Aphrodite shrieked, and all of the demigods, past and future alike cringed due to their ringing eardrums.

When she saw my eyes open, she asked, "What will happen at the summer solstice?"

The love goddess let her head droop in disappointment much to the amusement of the other gods and goddesses. Particularly the maiden goddesses.

I managed to croak, "What?"

She looked around, as if afraid someone would overhear. "What's going on? What was stolen? We've only got a few weeks!"

Athena and Theseus both started to work their brains in overdrive.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, "I don't..."

"Ha." Nico laughed, "Story of his life."

Somebody knocked on the door, and the girl quickly filled my mouth with pudding.

Thalia shrugged nonchalantly. "I suppose that is the best way to shut him up."

"I want pudding." Apollo moaned before pausing at looking at them. "Uh, what's pudding?" He looked at Nico since Thalia was obviously remembering something since she looked all nostalgic and everything. It mostly freaked a bunch of them out to see that punk like girl being...fond.

"It's sweet. And creamy. And it's made out of milk. And it's reaaaaaaally good." Nico shrugged thinking of pudding. Demeter was about to scold them but Apollo and Hermes cut her off with their chorus of "Yum! Pudding."

Artemis shot arrows at them to pull them out of their daze. "Keep reading!" She barked at Hercules who agreed immediately out of fear.
The next time I woke up, the girl was gone.

A husky blond dude, like a surfer, stood in the corner of the bedroom keeping watch over me. He had blue eyes— at least a dozen of them—on his cheeks, his forehead, the backs of his hands.

"Argus!" Hera gasped in relief. She had been fearing whether he was still alive, thankfully he was. Zeus shot her a guilty glance, but Hera's warm smile towards him indicated her forgiveness.

When I finally came around for good, there was nothing weird about my surroundings, except that they were nicer than I was used to.

Nico glared into nothingness. It shouldn't be like that. Percy deserved better.

I was sitting in a deck chair on a huge porch, gazing across a meadow at green hills in the distance. The breeze smelled like strawberries. There was a blanket over my legs, a pillow behind my neck. All that was great, but my mouth felt like a scorpion had been using it for a nest.

Theseus grimaced. "Why would he compare it to that?" The others neither knew nor did they have any desire to find out.

My tongue was dry and nasty and every one of my teeth hurt.

On the table next to me was a tall drink. It looked like iced apple juice, with a green straw and a paper parasol stuck through a maraschino cherry.

"Nectar." A dreamy sigh came from the past demigods. They rarely got a chance to have the heavenly drink and it made them a little jealous to hear that in the future it was available so readily.

My hand was so weak I almost dropped the glass once I got my fingers around it.

"Careful," a familiar voice said.

Grover was leaning against the porch railing, looking like he hadn't slept in a week.

Hermes smiled sympathetically for the poor satyr. "He most probably hadn't slept till Percy had woken up. Though I doubt it had been a week."

Under one arm, he cradled a shoe box. He was wearing blue jeans, Converse hi-tops and a bright orange T-shirt that said CAMPHALF-BLOOD. Just plain old Grover, Not the goat boy.

No matter if they liked or disliked the demigod a pang of pity rushed through them all. It was one thing to find out you were a demigod. It was another to have your mother killed in front of you because she was trying to protect you.

So maybe I'd had a nightmare. Maybe my mom was okay. We were still on vacation, and we'd stopped here at this big house for some reason. And...

Demeter's heart went out to Percy. She strongly believed that a mother and her child had a special relationship that shouldn't be harmed by anybody. Thinking of that made her give Hades a rotten glare. He was responsible for Percy's mother being gone as well as him influencing her daughter to
not heed her words any longer, in her opinion.

Persephone could tell exactly what her mother was thinking as an exasperated look appeared on her face.

"You saved my life," Grover said. "I... well, the least I could do ... I went back to the hill. I thought you might want this."

Reverently, he placed the shoe box in my lap.

Inside was a black-and-white bull's horn, the base jagged from being broken off, the tip splattered with dried blood. It hadn't been a nightmare.

"The Minotaur," I said.

Despite himself Theseus flinched. No matter what people said about his heroics the Minotaur truly was an impressive monster. Theseus was still in slight shock that Percy had defeated it with no training or even proper weaponry.

"Um, Percy, it isn't a good idea—"

"Names have power, the foolish child." Athena rolled her eyes at the demigod's stupidity.

Poseidon's rage grew and he snapped at the wisdom goddess. "The boy lost his mother! Would you shut up about what he does or doesn't say?"

Poseidon's voice was quiet but deadly. Even Athena flinched in fear at the anger that radiated in his voice. Losing her self-control a little Athena couldn't help but mutter a quick sorry hoping he would stop. Luckily for her Poseidon was too enthralled in his future son's fate to care about her. Triton's angry look at her though made her feel ashamed.

"That's what they call him in the Greek myths, isn't it?" I demanded. "The Minotaur. Half man, half bull."

Amphitrite quietly wondered if her husband's rage was more guilt than anything else. He had been the one to cause the creation of the Minotaur and then two of his sons were put in mortal danger whilst fighting it.

Grover shifted uncomfortably. "You've been out for two days. How much do you remember?"

"My mom. Is she really ..."

Persephone and Hades once again furrowed their brows. Hades didn't know what to make of it. He glanced up at his Furies who seemed just as perplexed.

He looked down.

I stared across the meadow. There were groves of trees, a winding stream, acres of strawberries spread out under the blue sky. The valley was surrounded by rolling hills, and the tallest one, directly in front of us, was the one with the huge pine tree on top. Even that looked beautiful in the sunlight.

My mother was gone. The whole world should be black and cold. Nothing should look
beautiful.

Ariadne felt pure pity for the young demigod. In his mind he had lost the only family he had. He was alone and Ariadne remembered how that felt. Her husband Dionysus looked like he was reading her mind. Which he was. He took her hand in his offering his support. Ariadne squeezed it thankfully.

"I'm sorry," Grover sniffled. "I'm a failure. I'm—I'm the worst satyr in the world."

Hermes shook his head. "No! No you're not, and Pan would agree with me!" Dionysus reluctantly nodded. Thalia and Nico smiled knowing Grover would have been very pleased with the praise.

He moaned, stomping his foot so hard it came off. I mean, the Converse hi-top came off. The inside was filled with Styrofoam, except for a hoof-shaped hole.

"Oh, Styx!" he mumbled.

Thunder rolled across the clear sky.

"Yeah Zeus does that." Apollo joked. "Pops always had a flare for the dramatics." Zeus scowled while the others cracked smiles.

As he struggled to get his hoof back in the fake foot, I thought, well, that settles it.

Grover was a satyr. I was ready to bet that if I shaved his curly brown hair, I'd find tiny horns on his head.

Orion nodded wisely. "Yes, yes you would young Percy Jackson." Artemis stared at the hunter in surprise. The more time they spent here, the more he seemed like her brother. Secretly listening in to her thoughts, Apollo scowled at being compared to Orion.

But I was too miserable to care that satyrs existed, or even Minotaurs. All that meant was my mom really had been squeezed into nothingness, dissolved into yellow light.

Though Nico flinched at the reminder of Sally Jackson being apparently dead he had to look at his father suspiciously. Mortals did not die by transforming into golden light. They had corpses.

I was alone. An orphan. I would have to live with ... Smelly Gabe?

Several people's faces darkened. No one would allow Percy to stay with that pig of a man.

No. That would never happen. I would live on the streets first. I would pretend I was seventeen and join the army.

Ares scoffed. "Better train first punk. You can hardly handle a sword, who'd accept you?" The war god sneered, though Aphrodite smiled knowing he was impressed by Percy's courage.

I'd do something.

Grover was still sniffling. The poor kid—poor goat, satyr, whatever—looked as if he expected to be hit.

Persephone looked at the book with a sympathetic expression on her face. The satyr had tried after all, but the Minotaur wasn't an enemy just anyone could defeat.
I said, "It wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was. I was supposed to protect you."

Perseus frowned. "Supposed to protect him? When did satyrs get that duty?"

The gods looked a little awkward and avoided the past demigods by turning their attention elsewhere. "They help demigods get to camp where they'll be trained." Zeus said in the end cursing the rest of the council inwardly.

Hercules stared at him. "And you didn't bother taking us there?"

"It's a new idea!" Poseidon protested. "We're trying it out because there are more monsters and more demigods. Plus it's a great way for Chiron to use his new immortality."

Theseus blinked. "Chiron wasn't immortal to begin with?" Hercules shook his head sadly, he wasn't upset about the camp and satyr thing anymore. None of them were. They all respected Chiron deeply.

"Did my mother ask you to protect me?"

"No. But that's my job. I'm a keeper. At least... I was."

"But why..." I suddenly felt dizzy, my vision swimming.

"Don't strain yourself," Grover said. "Here." He helped me hold my glass and put the straw to my lips.

I recoiled at the taste,

"WHAT?!" The King of the Gods thundered looking pleased to finally have an excuse to do so. "Did the demigod spawn just dare to insult the food of the gods?!"

The others rolled their eyes. "Um...Lord Zeus?" Hercules asked carefully. Zeus stopped raging insults at Percy Jackson to look at his own son. "Yes, Hercules?" His voice was terse.

"Can I continue reading? The boy...he didn't really insult it per say." Zeus glared at being proven wrong. Theseus grinned at Hercules, while others looked conflicted. Artemis, Zoë and Apollo had no such qualms and they glared openly.

**Because I was expecting apple juice.**

Zeus tried very hard not to slump in his throne at all the smug looks everyone shot at him. Inwardly he decided to make them all suffer. One way or another by the end of this book they would be begging for his forgiveness!

It wasn't that at all. It was chocolate-chip cookies. Liquid cookies. And not just any cookies—my mom's homemade blue chocolate-chip cookies, buttery and hot, with the chips still melting. Drinking it, my whole body felt warm and good, full of energy. My grief didn't go away, but I felt as if my mom had just brushed her hand against my cheek, given me a cookie the way she used to when I was small, and told me everything was going to be okay.

Demeter, Hestia, Persephone and basically any goddess who had ever been a mother even once in their immortal lives felt a lump lodge in their throat.
"The best son any mother could ask for." Hera stated softly her eyes softening at just how much the boy missed his mother.

Thalia and Nico both knew just how Percy must have felt. All those times they had accused him of not knowing what it was like to lose the most important person in anyone's life...for being falsely sympathetic...they both wished they could take it back. He had felt that pain though neither had ever wanted him to.

Before I knew it, I'd drained the glass. I stared into it, sure I'd just had a warm drink, but the ice cubes hadn't even melted.

"That's nectar for you." Apollo tried to ease the mood but everyone was still far too emotional over what had happened.

"Was it good?" Grover asked.

I nodded.

"What did it taste like?" He sounded so wistful, I felt guilty.

"Sorry," I said. "I should've let you taste."

"NO!" Several people cried out.

"Foolish boy," Athena spat. "Did he want to kill the satyr?"

"Shut up!" Thalia snapped. "Percy would never want that. Grover is his best friend. And you know what? He just lost his mother and was shoved into a world he knows absolutely nothing about. And he most especially isn't here to even defend himself. So would you just cut the taunts?"

Athena glared. It was one thing to be spoken to like that by another god, but she would not tolerate such insults from other demigods. "Why you..." She began but her father cut her off.

"Enough Athena. You can settle this later. And I agree your interruptions are not welcomed."

Athena stared at Zeus. He had just taken the side of this mortal girl over her. She felt her anger boil over. Thalia Grace would pay for that. No one insulted Athena and got away with it.

His eyes got wide. "No! That's not what I meant. I just... wondered."


He sighed. "And how do you feel?"

"Like I could throw Nancy Bobofit a hundred yards."

"You should." Ares advised. The war god was getting antsy sitting around in a book filled with emotional trash. All he wanted were the epic fighting scenes.

"That's good," he said. "That's good. I don't think you could risk drinking any more of that stuff."

"What do you mean?"

He took the empty glass from me gingerly, as if it were dynamite,
"Technically it is." Ariadne pointed out. "At least for him. There could be remains of the nectar."

And set it back on the table. "Come on. Chiron and Mr. D are waiting."

The porch wrapped all the way around the farmhouse.

My legs felt wobbly, trying to walk that far. Grover offered to carry the Minotaur horn, but I held on to it. I'd paid for that souvenir the hard way. I wasn't going to let it go.

At that Ares nodded. It was a spoils of war. When you survive something like that the spoils are something you want to keep around you for a long time.

As we came around the opposite end of the house, I caught my breath.

We must've been on the north shore of Long Island, because on this side of the house, the valley marched all the way up to the water, which glittered about a mile in the distance. Between here and there, I simply couldn't process everything I was seeing. The landscape was dotted with buildings that looked like ancient Greek architecture—an open-air pavilion, an amphitheater, a circular arena—except that they all looked brand new, their white marble columns sparkling in the sun. In a nearby sandpit, a dozen high school-age kids and satyrs played volleyball. Canoes glided across a small lake. Kids in bright orange T-shirts like Grover's were chasing each other around a cluster of cabins nestled in the woods. Some shot targets at an archery range. Others rode horses down a wooded trail, and, unless I was hallucinating, some of their horses had wings.

"Pegasi." Triton stated a little fondly. The original Pegasus may have been a half-brother, but his descendants were truly useful creatures.

Down at the end of the porch, two men sat across from each other at a card table. The blond-haired girl who'd spoon-fed me popcorn-flavored pudding was leaning on the porch rail next to them.

Thalia and Nico sat still a little nervously. They were really thankful Percy wasn't here right now, otherwise Dionysus might have just killed him. Maybe by the time Percy was finally brought back, the anger they were sure Dionysus would have may have simmered down.

The man facing me was small, but porky. He had a red nose, big watery eyes, and curly hair so black it was almost purple. He looked like those paintings of baby angels—what do you call them, hubbubs? No, cherubs. That's it. He looked like a cherub who'd turned middle-aged in a trailer park. He wore a tiger-pattern Hawaiian shirt, and he would've fit right in at one of Gabe's poker parties, except I got the feeling this guy could've out-gambled even my stepfather.

"Is that supposed to be me?" Dionysus asked very carefully trying not to strangle anyone here.

Thalia and Nico hesitantly nodded. "Right." The god nodded and summoned a wine glass in his hand. Ariadne patted his shoulder as he drank freshly pressed wine. It may have been enough to keep him in control though the Furies did catch a glance of grape vines growing in a frenzied fashion.

"That's Mr. D," Grover murmured to me. "He's the camp director. Be polite. The girl, that's Annabeth Chase. She's just a camper, but she's been here longer than just about anybody.
And you already know Chiron..."

He pointed at the guy whose back was to me.

First, I realized he was sitting in the wheelchair. Then I recognized the tweed jacket, the thinning brown hair, the scraggly beard.

"Mr. Brunner?" They all said in a dumbfounded voice. Except Athena, Hercules, Thalia, Nico and other select few.

"Mr. Brunner!" I cried.

"You all think like Percy." Theseus accused. Others grinned while some glared. The gods were better than demigods!

The Latin teacher turned and smiled at me. His eyes had that mischievous glint they sometimes got in class when he pulled a pop quiz and made all the multiple choice answers B.

"I wonder what he's thinking of when he uses the letter B." Hercules mused.

"Ah, good, Percy," he said. "Now we have four for pinochle."

He offered me a chair to the right of Mr. D, who looked at me with bloodshot eyes and heaved a great sigh. "Oh, I suppose I must say it. Welcome to Camp Half-Blood. There. Now, don't expect me to be glad to see you."

Ariadne looked at her husband amused. Dionysus merely scowled at her. "He's a brat." He informed his wife who merely laughed much to his dismay.

"Uh, thanks." I scooted a little farther away from him because, if there was one thing I had learned from living with Gabe, it was how to tell when an adult has been hitting the happy juice. If Mr. D was a stranger to alcohol, I was a satyr.

Though none of them were pleased about that fact or the fact Percy felt the need to move away from Dionysus for that, they all laughed.

Even Dionysus smirked and drawled, "Wine is most definitely happy juice. He isn't wrong there."

"Annabeth?" Mr. Brunner called to the blond girl.

She came forward and Mr. Brunner introduced us. "This young lady nursed you back to health, Percy. Annabeth, my dear, why don't you go check on Percy's bunk? We'll be putting him in cabin eleven for now."

"Why do I get the feeling cabin eleven, is my cabin?" Hermes asked with a sigh.

"That's because it most probably is, god of travelers." Hestia smiled at him and Hermes couldn't help but smile back.

Annabeth said, "Sure, Chiron."

She was probably my age, maybe a couple of inches taller, and a whole lot more athletic looking.
"She's probably been training for a long time." Zoë stated feeling pride for the young girl.

With her deep tan and her curly blond hair, she was almost exactly what I thought a stereotypical California girl would look like, except her eyes ruined the image. They were startling gray, like storm clouds; pretty, but intimidating, too, as if she were analyzing the best way to take me down in a fight.


Aphrodite winced. "Guess I can't pair them together anymore. They'll hate each other once the truth is out."

Ares grinned at her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Fine line between love and hate."

Aphrodite brightened and looked at Ares adoringly. "You're right, it could still work." The war god grinned knowing he was going to get lucky tonight.

Hephaestus on the other hand scowled in disgust.

She glanced at the Minotaur horn in my hands, then back at me. I imagined she was going to say, 'You killed a minotaur!' or 'Wow, you're so awesome!' or something like that.

Zoë glared. "Spoken like a typical man." Her mistress nodded in agreement.

Instead she said, "You drool when you sleep."

There was silence. And then they all started roaring in laughter.

Then she sprinted off down the lawn, her blond hair flying behind her.

"So," I said, anxious to change the subject. "You, uh, work here, Mr. Brunner?"

"Not Mr. Brunner," the ex—Mr. Brunner said. "I'm afraid that was a pseudonym. You may call me Chiron."

"Okay." Totally confused, I looked at the director. "And Mr. D ... does that stand for something?"

"He couldn't figure that out." By now Dionysus figured he had reached a new height on how much any god could be insulted.

Hades on the other hand was extremely pleased at the turn of events. The Olympians deserved some disrespect after the blatant rude behavior they constantly display to him.

Mr. D stopped shuffling the cards. He looked at me like I'd just belched loudly. "Young man, names are powerful things. You don't just go around using them for no reason."

"Good teaching D."

Dionysus allowed a few grape vines to snake along Apollo and Hermes' thrones. The two shut up.

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

"I must say, Percy," Chiron-Brunner broke in, "I'm glad to see you alive. It's been a long time
since I've made a house call to a potential camper. I'd hate to think I've wasted my time."

Amphitrite raised a brow. "He's kind."

"House call?"

"My year at Yancy Academy, to instruct you. We have satyrs at most schools, of course, keeping a lookout. But Grover alerted me as soon as he met you. He sensed you were something special, so I decided to come upstate.

"A son of Poseidon is pretty special." Orion grinned.

The others who weren't related to Poseidon directly rolled their eyes in disagreement.

I convinced the other Latin teacher to ... ah, take a leave of absence."

"Literally?" Hades questioned making a mental note to discuss with everyone why killing people was a nuisance and should be avoided. It was bad for the Underworld, too many souls to sort.

"No." Nico shot his father a disturbed look. "Chiron meant as a holiday."

I tried to remember the beginning of the school year. It seemed like so long ago, but I did have a fuzzy memory of there being another Latin teacher my first week at Yancy. Then, without explanation, he had disappeared and Mr. Brunner had taken the class.

"You came to Yancy just to teach me?" I asked.

"Well don't get a big head." Hestia scolded though her expression was motherly.

Chiron nodded. "Honestly, I wasn't sure about you at first. We contacted your mother, let her know we were keeping an eye on you in case you were ready for Camp Half-Blood. But you still had so much to learn. Nevertheless, you made it here alive, and that's always the first test."

"Grover." Mr. D said impatiently, "are you playing or not?"

"Yes, sir!" Grover trembled as he took the fourth chair, though I didn't know why he should be so afraid of a pudgy little man in a tiger-print Hawaiian shirt.

"Pudgy?" Dionysus snarled. "Just wait till you get back here you brat! I'll show you pudgy."
Ariadne patted his shoulder and winced in sympathy for the young demigod. She was positive he had never imagined someone would be reading his thoughts or he wouldn't have said the less than flattering description.

"You do know how to play pinochle?" Mr. D eyed me suspiciously.

"I'm afraid not," I said.

"I'm afraid not, sir," he said.

"Sir," I repeated. I was liking the camp director less and less.

"Yeah? Well this camp director doesn't like you much either." Some of the demigods noticed Dionysus' eyes flash purple. They gulped and prayed Percy would take a very long time in returning.
"Well," he told me, "it is, along with gladiator fighting and Pac-Man, one of the greatest games ever invented by humans. I would expect all civilized young men to know the rules."

"I'm sure the boy can learn," Chiron said.

"Please," I said, "what is this place? What am I doing here? Mr. Brun—Chiron—why would you go to Yancy Academy just to teach me?"

Mr. D snorted. "I asked the same question."

The camp director dealt the cards. Grover flinched every time one landed in his pile.

Hermes frowned at Dionysus. "You really shouldn't be scaring the poor satyrs like that, D."

Dionysus looked at Hermes absolutely furious, his vines dancing along the edges of his throne. "You want to repeat that Hermes?"

The god of messengers backed off.

Chiron smiled at me sympathetically, the way he used to in Latin class, as if to let me know that no matter what my average was, I was his star student. He expected me to have the right answer.

From behind the book Hercules pouted. He was Chiron's star student, not that stupid son of Poseidon.

"Percy," he said. "Did your mother tell you nothing?"

"She said ..." I remembered her sad eyes, looking out over the sea. "She told me she was afraid to send me here, even though my father had wanted her to. She said that once I was here, I probably couldn't leave. She wanted to keep me close to her."

"Typical," Mr. D said. "That's how they usually get killed. Young man, are you bidding or not?"

"Be a little more sympathetic." Hera snapped at him ignoring his vines inching towards her. "And stop throwing a temper tantrum! The boy isn't here for you to let your anger loose at so stop acting like a stuck-up child!"

Dionysus threw her a vicious glare in return but let his vines go limp nonetheless instead having them sprout gigantic red and green grapes. He munched on them moodily.

"What?" I asked.

He explained, impatiently, how you bid in pinochle, and so I did.

"I'm afraid there's too much to tell," Chiron said. "I'm afraid our usual orientation film won't be sufficient."

"Orientation film?" I asked.

Thalia and Nico groaned. "You should have let him watch the orientation film!" No wonder Percy didn't know so many things about their world. No one ever actually taught him.
"No," Chiron decided. "Well, Percy. You know your friend Grover is a satyr. You know"—he pointed to the horn in the shoe box—"that you have killed the Minotaur. No small feat, either, lad.

Theseus looked as if he had been told Zeus wasn't the King of the Gods. "That's it? It just wasn't a small feat? Not that it was amazing and award worthy or anything?!"

"Well in all fairness, you have already done it. It's not that special anymore." Perseus told him gently and Theseus accepted it with a heart broken sigh.

Ariadne stared at him however. Yes, he had given her credit in his myth, but he never implicitly said that he would have failed without her. Dionysus held her hand though and she smiled at him radiantly. It was okay, she was much happier with her husband.

What you may not know is that great powers are at work in your life. Gods—the forces you call the Greek gods—are very much alive.

I stared at the others around the table.

I waited for somebody to yell, 'Not!' But all I got was Mr. D yelling, "Oh, a royal marriage. Trick! Trick!" He cackled as he tallied up his points.

"Poor boy." Demeter looked a little cross. "He just lost his mother and you all aren't even going to try to help him adjust to this new atmosphere?"

Unfortunately for her, she was ignored.

"Mr. D," Grover asked timidly, "if you're not going to eat it, could I have your Diet Coke can?"

"Eh? Oh, all right."

Grover bit a huge shard out of the empty aluminum can and chewed it mournfully.

Hermes nodded pretending to have the wisdom of a monk. "Yes, satyrs do eat a lot of metal when they are stressed about something."

"Thank you for the information." Triton said in a bored voice. Hermes grinned at him looking like a five-year old on a sugar rush. "You're welcome Triton!"

"Wait," I told Chiron. "You're telling me there's such a thing as God."

"Well, now," Chiron said. "God—capital G, God. That's a different matter altogether. We shan't deal with the metaphysical."

"Metaphysical? But you were just talking about—"

"Ah, gods, plural, as in, great beings that control the forces of nature and human endeavors: the immortal gods of Olympus. That's a smaller matter."

Every single god in the room dropped their and jaw and indignantly exclaimed "Smaller?!

"We need to have a serious word with that centaur." Ares said roughly and the others nodded in agreement.
"Several sacrifices will be required." Poseidon added. There was no argument there.

"Smaller?"

"Yes, quite. The gods we discussed in Latin class."


"Ha. He likes us better Uncle Poseidon." Apollo grinned.

Poseidon could only sigh and droop his head. He then smirked triumphantly "Can't say he'd like Zeus better though."

Apollo nodded agreeing. "True." Zeus' offended look obviously didn't matter to them.

And there it was again—distant thunder on a cloudless day.

"Yes, because Zeus is a drama queen." Hades sighed looking up as the ceiling held all the answers. Zeus scowled. His brothers would do anything to make him look bad.

"Young man," said Mr. D, "I would really be less casual about throwing those names around, if I were you."

"But they're stories," I said. "They're—myths, to explain lightning and the seasons and stuff. They're what people believed before there was science."

Thalia and Nico exchanged glances. Percy really was someone you'd wish would never meet the gods. It was like he had an inborn talent for offending them.

"Science!" Mr. D scoffed. "And tell me, Perseus Jackson"—I flinched when he said my real name, which I never told anybody—"what will people think of your 'science' two thousand years from now?" Mr. D continued. "Hmm? They will call it primitive mumbo jumbo. That's what. Oh, I love mortals—they have absolutely no sense of perspective. They think they've come so-o-o far. And have they, Chiron? Look at this boy and tell me."

"You were mortal too once." Hera accused him.

"Demigod. There's a difference stepmother dear." Dionysus drawled back.

I wasn't liking Mr. D much, but there was something about the way he called me mortal, as if... he wasn't. It was enough to put a lump in my throat, to suggest why Grover was dutifully minding his cards, chewing his soda can, and keeping his mouth shut.

"Percy," Chiron said, "you may choose to believe or not, but the fact is that immortal means immortal. Can you imagine that for a moment, never dying? Never fading? Existing, just as you are, for all time?"

I was about to answer, off the top of my head, that it sounded like a pretty good deal, but the tone of Chiron's voice made me hesitate.

"That's what Chiron does." Thalia smiled gently remembering her old teacher before the Hunt. "Makes you doubt yourself just enough to help you learn more."
"You mean, whether people believed in you or not," I said.

Nico privately thought, that was the only reason the gods still bothered with demigods. That was also the biggest reason as to why Luke or more accurately Kronos had wanted to recruit them.

"Exactly," Chiron agreed. "If you were a god, how would you like being called a myth, an old story to explain lightning? What if I told you, Perseus Jackson, that someday people would call you a myth, just created to explain how little boys can get over losing their mothers?"

Hera and Demeter literally saw red. "That was low." Hera glared and Demeter looked as if she wanted to strangle something or someone. "You never ever make a joke like that about parent and child being separated."

Persephone stared at her own mother in shock. She hadn't known that Demeter felt that strongly about it.

My heart pounded. He was trying to make me angry for some reason, but I wasn't going to let him. I said, "I wouldn't like it. But I don't believe in gods."

"Oh, you'd better," Mr. D murmured. "Before one of them incinerates you."

"Dionysus you wouldn't dare." Poseidon told him seriously.

The god in question just waved Poseidon off however.

Grover said, "P-please, sir. He's just lost his mother. He's in shock."

"A lucky thing, too," Mr. D grumbled, playing a card. "Bad enough I'm confined to this miserable job, working with boys who don't even believe."

He waved his hand and a goblet appeared on the table, as if the sunlight had bent, momentarily, and woven the air into glass. The goblet filled itself with red wine.

My jaw dropped, but Chiron hardly looked up.

Ares grinned wickedly. "That's nothing kid. Wait till you see the good stuff."

"Mr. D," he warned, "your restrictions."

Dionysus frowned, "Restrictions? On wine? I'm the god of wine. I don't have restrictions."

Mr. D looked at the wine and feigned surprise.

"Dear me." He looked at the sky and yelled, "Old habits! Sorry!"

More thunder.

Dionysus stared at Zeus. "You restricted me from wine?!"

Zeus looked at him unapologetically. "You probably deserved it." Dionysus gaped at him. "Wine is my symbol of power! You can't take away wine from me!"

Zeus glared, "I can do anything. I am the King of the Gods." Dionysus looked at his father murderously.
Mr. D waved his hand again, and the wineglass changed into a fresh can of Diet Coke. He sighed unhappily, popped the top of the soda, and went back to his card game.

Chiron winked at me. "Mr. D offended his father a while back, took a fancy to a wood nymph who had been declared off-limits."

"Probably because he wanted the nymph all to himself." Dionysus spat and Hera straightened. She knew that Dionysus was most probably correct.

"A wood nymph," I repeated, still staring at the Diet Coke can like it was from outer space.

"Yes," Mr. D confessed. "Father loves to punish me. The first time, Prohibition. Ghastly! Absolutely horrid ten years! The second time—well, she really was pretty, and I couldn't stay away—the second time, he sent me here. Half-Blood Hill. Summer camp for brats like you. 'Be a better influence,' he told me. 'Work with youths rather than tearing them down.' Ha. Absolutely unfair."

Ariadne knew she shouldn't complain. After all Dionysus had just found out he wouldn't be able to have wine in the future. But she couldn't help it either. Ariadne turned to her husband with pure dismay written on her face. "Twice?"

Dionysus glanced at her and pushed his anger to the back of his consciousness. "You know that I wouldn't really want anyone but you." Ariadne smiled though there was a little bit of hurt lingering inside of her.

Dionysus could almost read her mind so he put an arm around her shoulders and drew her closer to his chest. Feeling his warmth, Ariadne let her insecurity wash away.

Mr. D sounded about six years old, like a pouting little kid.

Laughter ensued and if Dionysus wasn't having such a beautiful moment with Ariadne he would have definitely expressed his anger.

"And ..." I stammered, "your father is ...""Di immortales, Chiron," Mr. D said. "I thought you taught this boy the basics. My father is Zeus, of course."

"It took him that long to realize?" Athena asked completely shocked.

I ran through D names from Greek mythology. Wine. The skin of a tiger. The satyrs that all seemed to work here. The way Grover cringed, as if Mr. D were his master.

"You're Dionysus," I said. "The god of wine."

"Yeah, the god of wine. Which I'm not allowed to have apparently." He grumbled soaking in Ariadne's scent to be able to be distracted.

Mr. D rolled his eyes. "What do they say, these days, Grover? Do the children say, 'Well, duh!'?"

"Y-yes, Mr. D."

"Then, well, duh! Percy Jackson. Did you think I was Aphrodite, perhaps?"
Aphrodite made a sound of disgust. "Never."

Dionysus sneered at her. "Don't want to be you either, don't worry."

"You're a god."

"Yes, child."

"A god. You."

"We wonder the same thing." Apollo and Hermes said in complete seriousness. By this time Dionysus and Ariadne and broken out of their embrace and Dionysus simply sighed feeling they were no longer worth it.

He turned to look at me straight on, and I saw a kind of purplish fire in his eyes, a hint that this whiny, plump little man was only showing me the tiniest bit of his true nature. I saw visions of grape vines choking unbelievers to death, drunken warriors insane with battle lust, sailors screaming as their hands turned to flippers, their faces elongating into dolphin snouts. I knew that if I pushed him, Mr. D would show me worse things. He would plant a disease in my brain that would leave me wearing a straight-jacket in a rubber room for the rest of my life.

Dionysus finally smiled. "Not completely stupid then now is he?"

"Would you like to test me, child?" he said quietly.

"No. No, sir."

The fire died a little. He turned back to his card game. "I believe I win."

"Not quite, Mr. D," Chiron said. He set down a straight, tallied the points, and said, "The game goes to me."

The gods all blinked in surprise and Hermes' jaw dropped. "Chiron's secretly a good gambler? No way and he's never even played me." Hermes sat straighter looking as if though he had a legitimate goal. "I will get him to play me and then win!" He declared.

Artemis had completely given up on trying to discipline him.

I thought Mr. D was going to vaporize Chiron right out of his wheelchair, but he just sighed through his nose, as if he were used to being beaten by the Latin teacher. He got up, and Grover rose, too.

"Good." Hermes sighed in relief. "It wasn't a matter of Tyche playing her games.

"I'm tired," Mr. D said. "I believe I'll take a nap before the sing-along tonight. But first, Grover, we need to talk, again, about your less-than-perfect performance on this assignment."

Grover's face beaded with sweat. "Y-yes, sir."

Mr. D turned to me. "Cabin eleven, Percy Jackson. And mind your manners."

He swept into the farmhouse, Grover following miserably.
Hermes stared at Dionysus. "Just what do you do to those poor satyrs that they're so scared of you?"

When faced with Dionysus' glare however Hermes accepted he was never going to find out.

"Will Grover be okay?" I asked Chiron.

Chiron nodded, though he looked a bit troubled. "Old Dionysus isn't really mad. He just hates his job. He's been ... ah, grounded, I guess you could say, and he can't stand waiting another century before he's allowed to go back to Olympus."


Hera took his side. Taking a god's symbol of power away for so long was extremely risky to their life span. "Husband?" She said dangerously. Zeus glared then nodded reluctantly. "Fine. Whatever. We'll see when the time comes anyways."

That was the best any of them was going to get.

"Mount Olympus," I said. "You're telling me there really is a palace there?"

"Well now, there's Mount Olympus in Greece. And then there's the home of the gods, the convergence point of their powers, which did indeed used to be on Mount Olympus. It's still called Mount Olympus, out of respect to the old ways, but the palace moves, Percy, just as the gods do."

"It does?" This came as a surprise to the gods. They hadn't expected to leave Greece.

"You mean the Greek gods are here? Like ... in America?"

"Well, certainly. The gods move with the heart of the West."

"The West?" Athena questioned her voice hungry with the need for knowledge.

"The what?"

"Come now, Percy. What you call 'Western civilization.' Do you think it's just an abstract concept? No, it's a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years. The gods are part of it. You might even say they are the source of it, or at least, they are tied so tightly to it that they couldn't possibly fade, not unless all of Western civilization were obliterated. The fire started in Greece. Then, as you well know—or as I hope you know, since you passed my course

"He passed?" Thalia exclaimed in mock surprise.

"Apparently." Nico stated, rolling his eyes at her antics but playing along.

—the heart of the fire moved to Rome, and so did the gods. Oh, different names, perhaps—Jupiter for Zeus, Venus for Aphrodite, and so on—but the same forces, the same gods."

"And then they died."

"Died? No. Did the West die? The gods simply moved, to Germany, to France, to Spain, for a
while. Wherever the flame was brightest, the gods were there. They spent several centuries in England. All you need to do is look at the architecture. People do not forget the gods. Every place they've ruled, for the last three thousand years, you can see them in paintings, in statues, on the most important buildings. And yes, Percy, of course they are now in your United States. Look at your symbol, the eagle of Zeus.

Zeus looked proud for a moment. Of course his symbol would be part of the new most important country. Poseidon and Hades wouldn't let that last though as Poseidon immediately stated, "The eagle must have just been the first thing they saw."

Hades shook his head. "No, I think they put a bunch of animal names in a helmet and picked that way."

Zeus hated them both. He really did.

Look at the statue of Prometheus in Rockefeller Center, the Greek facades of your government buildings in Washington. I dare you to find any American city where the Olympians are not prominently displayed in multiple places. Like it or not—and believe me, plenty of people weren't very fond of Rome,

"Rome? Where's that?" They all looked puzzled.

"Um…" Thalia began. "Rome doesn't exist yet. That's why."

Either—America is now the heart of the flame. It is the great power of the West. And so Olympus is here. And we are here."

It was all too much, especially the fact that I seemed to be included in Chiron's we, as if I were part of some club.

"Who are you, Chiron? Who ... who am I?"

Chiron smiled. He shifted his weight as if he were going to get up out of his wheelchair, but I knew that was impossible. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

They all grinned and desperately wished they could have seen Percy's expression then.

Finding out Chiron was a centaur like that? It must have been hilarious.

"Who are you?" he mused. "Well, that's the question we all want answered, isn't it? But for now, we should get you a bunk in cabin eleven. There will be new friends to meet. And plenty of time for lessons tomorrow. Besides, there will be s'mores at the campfire tonight, and I simply adore chocolate."

And then he did rise from his wheelchair. But there was something odd about the way he did it. His blanket fell away from his legs, but the legs didn't move. His waist kept getting longer, rising above his belt. At first, I thought he was wearing very long, white velvet underwear, but as he kept rising out of the chair, taller than any man, I realized that the velvet underwear wasn't underwear; it was the front of an animal, muscle and sinew under coarse white fur. And the wheelchair wasn't a chair. It was some kind of container, an enormous box on wheels, and it must've been magic, because there's no way it could've held all of him."
"It is. I made it." Hephaestus said.

"We figured." Thalia and Nico both nodded in acknowledgement.

A leg came out, long and knobby-kneed, with a huge polished hoof. Then another front leg, then hindquarters, and then the box was empty, nothing but a metal shell with a couple of fake human legs attached...

I stared at the horse who had just sprung from the wheelchair: a huge white stallion. But where its neck should be was the upper body of my Latin teacher, smoothly grafted to the horse's trunk.

"What a relief," the centaur said. "I'd been cooped up in there so long, my fetlocks had fallen asleep. Now, come, Percy Jackson. Let's meet the other campers."

"That's the end of the chapter." Hercules announced.

"Good." Dionysus muttered still a little upset.

Hephaestus took the book from Hercules. "I shall read the next chapter." He was about to flip the book open and begin when a golden glow filled the room. The light blinded even the gods. When it finally subsided a blond boy was sitting in the middle of the throne room looking very confused.

Chapter End Notes

Well this is coming along nicely. I'm glad you all like it!

Okay first: Who do you guys think the blond kid is? I'm really curious about what theories you have regarding him.

Second: Heads up. For the Blood of Olympus (Spoiler Alert): I'll be bringing him back from after the war but before Nico's confession. I have my own idea on how to address that. That's about it, thanks for reading!
They all stared at the boy wondering who he was. He had blond hair and was tall and lean, probably from constant training. Thalia felt a stab in her chest as she looked at him and thoughts raced in her mind. She blinked quickly trying to catch a glimpse of the boy's face. She took in a deep breath and mentally yelled at the boy to look up so she could find out who he was.

Her mind was unable to keep up with the curiosity she was feeling with a tiny rush of excitement. The boy looked at Thalia quickly and the punk girl could swear that his eyes were a shocking electric blue. He then took a look at his surroundings and somehow managed to figure out he was on Olympus in front of the gods. He immediately bowed down in front of Zeus. "My Lord," he spoke in a calm voice "May I ask why you have summoned me here?"

The gods stared at him "Rise hero and tell us your name."

The boy straightened "I am…"

Nico stood up interrupting him "None of your accomplishments, parenting, etc." The boy looked at Nico confused. "The Fates ordered us to keep quiet about...everything but our names."

The boy nodded in understanding. "My name is Jason Grace."

Thalia let out a gasp of sudden surprise. They all glanced at her sending her questioning looks but Thalia had eyes only for Jason. She took in his appearance. Every aspect of it trying to memorize all that she could, lest this be a dream. At that moment a note appeared out of thin air and fell down right in front of Thalia. She took it as a cue that she was the one who had to read it.

Dear Demigods of both times and Gods,

Look we apologize for the rather inconvenience. To warn you from now on people will be popping in and out. Yes, even if they are dead in your time Thalia and Nico. Jason, Nico is correct, do NOT say your godly parent in any circumstances. In case you were wondering yes, this entire scenario is crazy. You'll get used to it...Eventually. Have fun reading!

Thalia don't read this part out loud. Hera hid your brother away as he is dangerous to you, you'll find out how as you read on. One of the many reasons the heritages will not be disclosed before time. Don't worry he knows you are his sister and why you weren't with him. You encounter each other in the future. Heads up for you, your future self is going to trade places with you soon.

Sincerely the Fates (Morai), the Awesome Apollo and Heroic Hermes

Once Thalia had said the contents of the note out loud, it disappeared into gold dust. Jason sat down next to Thalia and shot her a grin. "Then shall we read?" Orion asked. Hephaestus took the book and began reading…

I Become Supreme Lord of the Bathroom

Once I got over the fact that my Latin teacher was a horse, we had a nice tour, though I was careful not to walk behind him. I'd done pooper-scooper patrol in the Macy's Thanksgiving
Day Parade a few times, and, I'm sorry, I did not trust Chiron's back end the way I trusted his front.

Hercules shook his head "Don't disrespect Chiron like that. He isn't any old horse."

Everyone stared at him and Theseus shook his head. "Don't mind him," he stage whispered "the dedication comes from being Chiron's so-called favourite."

They all laughed at that as Hercules glared into nothingness.

We passed the volleyball pit. Several of the campers nudged each other. One pointed to the minotaur horn I was carrying. Another said, "That's him."

Jason rose a brow "So even then he was popular?"

Thalia nodded "He was interesting." Then she laughed. "Just not for the right reasons."

Jason had mixed feelings about Percy. He was a good friend but Jason felt a little upset too that his sister preferred Percy over her own brother. It had honestly hurt a little to find out that she had searched harder for Percy than she had done for him.

Most of the campers were older than me. Their satyr friends were bigger than Grover, all of them trotting around in orange CAMP HALF-BLOOD T-shirts, with nothing else to cover their bare shaggy hindquarters. I wasn't normally shy, but the way they stared at me made me uncomfortable. I felt like they were expecting me to do a flip or something.

Orion looked at the book with a grin "Does he? Or can he?"

Nico stared at Orion weirdly "Um, I don't know. I never asked."

Thalia grinned and nudged Nico. "He remind you of anyone?" Nico scowled at the memory.

I looked back at the farmhouse. It was a lot bigger than I'd realized-four stories tall, sky blue with white trim, like an upscale seaside resort. I was checking out the brass eagle weather vane on top when something caught my eye, a shadow in the uppermost window of the attic gable. Something had moved the curtain, just for a second, and I got the distinct impression I was being watched.

Athena frowned "What would be watching him?"

Thalia and Nico exchanged glances and simultaneously shuddered, both remembering their respective experiences with the mummified oracle. They were both extremely glad Rachel was the Oracle now.

"What's up there?" I asked Chiron.

He looked where I was pointing, and his smile faded. "Just the attic."

"Somebody lives there?"

"No," he said with finality. "Not a single living thing."

Thalia and Nico nodded firmly. Technically it wasn't a lie, yet it was a lie. They were both certain that Hermes would be proud if he knew.
"Real good at changing topics, now isn't he?" Jason questioned remembering how Chiron had asked him for lemonade right after telling him he should be dead.

"Chiron has trouble being subtle to change topics sometimes." Perseus admitted albeit reluctantly.

We walked through the strawberry fields, where campers were picking bushels of berries while a satyr played a tune on a reed pipe.

Chiron told me the camp grew a nice crop for export to New York restaurants and Mount Olympus. "It pays our expenses," he explained. "And the strawberries take almost no effort."

He said Mr. D had this effect on fruit-bearing plants: they just went crazy when he was around. It worked best with wine grapes, but Mr. D was restricted from growing those, so they grew strawberries instead.

More glares thrown at Zeus. Dionysus refused to even look at his father instead holding Ariadne's hand tightly in order to rein in his temper.

I watched the satyr playing his pipe. His music was causing lines of bugs to leave the strawberry patch in every direction, like refugees fleeing a fire. I wondered if Grover could work that kind of magic with music.

Thalia burst out laughing. "Maybe now, but back then?"

I wondered if he was still inside the farmhouse, getting chewed out by Mr. D.

"Grover won't get in too much trouble, will he?" I asked Chiron. "I mean … he was a good protector. Really."

Nico and Thalia nodded in support. "A little crazy, but a good protector." Nico agreed. Jason stared at the two, why did they agree so much? He felt a little left out. He had to remind himself that this Nico and Thalia weren't the Nico he had become friends with, or the sister he had been reunited with in the face of trouble.

Chiron sighed. He shed his tweed jacket and draped it over his horses back like a saddle. "Grover has big dreams, Percy. Perhaps bigger than are reasonable. To reach his goal, he must first demonstrate great courage by succeeding as a keeper, finding a new camper and bringing him safely to Half-Blood Hill."

"But he did that!"

"Many times over, with several demigods." Thalia agreed stonily.

"I might agree with you," Chiron said. "But it is not my place to judge. Dionysus and the Council of Cloven Elders must decide. I'm afraid they might not see this assignment as a success. After all, Grover lost you in New York. Then there's the unfortunate … ah … fate of your mother. And the fact that Grover was unconscious when you dragged him over the property line. The council might question whether this shows any courage on Grover's part."
"Nice morale booster Chiron." Theseus commented with a sigh shaking his head.

I wanted to protest. None of what happened was Grover's fault. I also felt really, really guilty. If I hadn't given Grover the slip at the bus station, he might not have gotten in trouble.

"He'll get a second chance, won't he?"

Thalia winced a flash of memories going through her head.

Chiron winced. "I'm afraid that was Grover's second chance, Percy. The council was not anxious to give him another, either, after what happened the first time, five years ago. Olympus knows, I advised him to wait longer before trying again. He's still so small for his age... ."

"How old is he?"

"Oh, twenty-eight."

Jason stared at the book "Young?"

Hermes explained, "Satyrs grow slower than humans, because they live longer."

Orion gawked, "That sounds like a nightmare. Imagine being treated like a child, when you're actually an adult."

Jason frowned thinking, "That's probably the most frustrating thing in the universe."

Nico sighed, "I am sure it is, though to be fair Grover does act the same age as the rest of us."

Thalia bit her lip, "You mean excluding you right? Since you're much younger?" Nico glared as she laughed.

"What! And he's in sixth grade?"

"Satyrs mature half as fast as humans, Percy. Grover has been the equivalent of a middle school student for the past six years."

"That's horrible."

Thalia laughed, "Looks like Percy mostly agrees with us. Leave it to him to think of school as the most horrifying part of it all."

"Percy has some messed up priorities... is what I'd usually say. Honestly, I do remember going to school though so I agree with him there too," Nico shrugged.

"Quite," Chiron agreed. "At any rate, Grover is a late bloomer, even by satyr standards, and not yet very accomplished at woodland magic. Alas, he was anxious to pursue his dream. Perhaps now he will find some other career... ."

"I wonder what sort of dream a satyr would have," Hermes mused.

Jason shrugged. "No idea." He glanced at Thalia and Nico who seemed to be exchanging smirks but otherwise refused to talk.
"That's not fair," I said. "What happened the first time? Was it really so bad?"

Chiron looked away quickly. "Let's move along, shall we?"

Apollo looked at the book pained "Chiron! We need details!"

But I wasn't quite ready to let the subject drop. Something had occurred to me when Chiron talked about my mother's fate, as if he were intentionally avoiding the word death. The beginnings of an idea-a tiny, hopeful fire-started forming in my mind.

"Chiron," I said. "If the gods and Olympus and all that are real …"

"Oh no," Persephone fretted "Why do I feel…?" Hades took her hand "I think so too, my dove. Let's see if he succeeds." Persephone hoped her husband didn't kill him.

Overhearing their hushed conversation, Nico wanted to smack himself. Or Percy. He knew exactly what Percy was thinking.

"Yes, child?"

"Does that mean the Underworld is real, too?"


Now everyone else did too.

Chiron's expression darkened.

"Yes, child." He paused, as if choosing his words carefully. "There is a place where spirits go after death. But for now … until we know more … I would urge you to put that out of your mind."

"What do you mean, 'until we know more'?"

"Come, Percy. Let's see the woods."

Hermes sniffed in pretense "Chiron…" Fake tears replaced and a look with Apollo "We must teach you." Apollo smirked and the two high-fived.

As we got closer, I realized how huge the forest was. It took up at least a quarter of the valley, with trees so tall and thick, you could imagine nobody had been in there since the Native Americans.

"Who are the Native Americans and why would they live in forests? Are they a new type of dryad?" Demeter asked confused.

"Not exactly." Thalia answered being the only one who really had knowledge on the matter.

Chiron said, "The woods are stocked, if you care to try your luck, but go armed."

"Stocked with what?" I asked. "Armed with what?"

"You'll see. Capture the flag is Friday night. Do you have your own sword and shield?"
"My own-?"

"Well he wouldn't, but some godly parents give their children weapons beforehand." Athena informed them.

Everyone rolled their eyes. She didn't say? It's not like they were gods and demigods or anything like that. Sometimes they all wanted to tell Athena to shut up.

"No," Chiron said. "I don't suppose you do. I think a size five will do. I'll visit the armory later."

I wanted to ask what kind of summer camp had an armory,

"Our camp does, Percy."

but there was too much else to think about, so the tour continued. We saw the archery range, the canoeing lake, the stables (which Chiron didn't seem to like very much),

Hercules laughed. "Chiron detests stables."

Perseus looked at his half-brother and couldn't help but tease him. "You're his favourite. You would know." Hercules scowled.

the javelin range, the sing-along amphitheater, and the arena where Chiron said they held sword and spear fights.

"Sword and spear fights?" I asked.


Jason winced and questioned "Usually?"

Thalia nodded. "If you maim someone, no dessert privileges for a week."

Jason stared at his sister dumbfounded. "That's it?" When he received a nod in affirmative he smacked himself on the head and muttered to himself "How have the Greeks managed to survive for so long? Its a mystery they aren't dead yet.

Oh, yes, and there's the mess hall."

Chiron pointed to an outdoor pavilion framed in white Grecian columns on a hill overlooking the sea. There were a dozen stone picnic tables. No roof. No walls.

"Classic." Zeus nodded in approval.

Poseidon and Hades rolled their eyes.

"What do you do when it rains?" I asked.

Chiron looked at me as if I'd gone a little weird. "We still have to eat, don't we?" I decided to drop the subject.

"Why?" Ariadne questioned. "He's new to this world, it's a fair question. By the way, what does happen?"
Zoë answered "The borders are enchanted Lady Ariadne. Weather is only permitted by will."

Thalia spoke up "Unless one of the gods make the weather happen, out of anger to the campers."

Finally, he showed me the cabins. There were twelve of them, nestled in the woods by the lake. They were arranged in a U, with two at the base and five in a row on either side. And they were without doubt the most bizarre collection of buildings I'd ever seen.

The gods frowned offended. "Why?"

Except for the fact that each had a large brass number above the door (odds on the left side, evens on the right), they looked absolutely nothing alike.

Their anger subsided as they calmed down hearing those words.

**Number nine had smokestacks, like a tiny factory.**

Hephaestus smiled as he read.

**Number four had tomato vines on the walls and a roof made out of real grass.**

Demeter looked pleased and Persephone rolled her eyes.

**Seven seemed to be made of solid gold, which gleamed so much in the sunlight it was almost impossible to look at.**

Apollo grinned. "My cabin!"

They all faced a commons area about the size of a soccer field, dotted with Greek statues, fountains, flower beds, and a couple of basketball hoops (which were more my speed).

Apollo grinned "Really Cuz? We have to play, as soon as I find out what basket-ball is."

Thalia rolled her eyes "You shoot a ball through a hoop in the air."

Apollo grinned "I repeat, we must play."

In the center of the field was a huge stone-lined fire pit. Even though it was a warm afternoon, the hearth smoldered. A girl about nine years old was tending the flames, poking the coals with a stick.

"He saw me, the first time there." Hestia said smiling happily. It was nice to have her family notice her.

The pair of cabins at the head of the field, numbers one and two, looked like his-and-hers mausoleums, big white marble boxes with heavy columns in front. Cabin one was the biggest and bulkiest of the twelve. Its polished bronze doors shimmered like a hologram, so that from different angles lightning bolts seemed to streak across them.


**Cabin two was more graceful somehow, with slimmer columns garlanded with pomegranates and flowers. The walls were carved with images of peacocks.**
Hera smiled, her cabin sounded beautiful.

"Zeus and Hera?" I guessed.

"Correct," Chiron said.

"Their cabins look empty."

Hera looked pleased, "Good."

"Several of the cabins are. That's true. No one ever stays in one or two."

The gods frowned, Two was normal but why One?

Okay. So each cabin had a different god, like a mascot.

Theseus looked at the book "I guess you could say that."

Twelve cabins for the twelve Olympians. But why would some be empty?

I stopped in front of the first cabin on the left, cabin three.

Triton and Amphitrite looked at Poseidon, "You were calling to him." Amphitrite said amazed, usually the demigods didn't notice.

Triton wasn't sure if he should feel impressed or upset. His father seemed to care more about his demigod child than his actual child and heir.

It wasn't high and mighty like cabin one, but long and low and solid. The outer walls were of rough gray stone studded with pieces of seashell and coral, as if the slabs had been hewn straight from the bottom of the ocean floor.

Theseus and Orion grinned, their cabin sounded awesome!

I peeked inside the open doorway and Chiron said, "Oh, I wouldn't do that!"

Before he could pull me back, I caught the salty scent of the interior, like the wind on the shore at Montauk. The interior walls glowed like abalone. There were six empty bunk beds with silk sheets turned down. But there was no sign anyone had ever slept there.

"What?! Why?" everyone was confused, Zeus and Poseidon not having any kids? What happened? Amphitrite was a little pleased to hear that, though also a bit worried.

The place felt so sad and lonely, I was glad when Chiron put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Come along, Percy."

The gods snickered and Zeus laughed "Your son doesn't want to stay in your cabin."

Poseidon glared at them all.

Thalia and Jason hid their laughter at Zeus' words, both realizing the irony behind it.

Most of the other cabins were crowded with campers.

Number five was bright red-a real nasty paint job, as if the color had been splashed on with
buckets and fists. The roof was lined with barbed wire. A stuffed wild boar's head hung over the doorway, and its eyes seemed to follow me.

Ares grinned, "Just my style."

Inside I could see a bunch of mean-looking kids, both girls and boys, arm wrestling and arguing with each other while rock music blared. The loudest was a girl maybe thirteen or fourteen. She wore a size XXXL CAMP HALF-BLOOD T-shirt under a camouflage jacket. She zeroed in on me and gave me an evil sneer. She reminded me of Nancy Bobofit, though the camper girl was much bigger and tougher looking, and her hair was long and stringy, and brown instead of red.

Ares stared at the book interested. One of his kids was mentioned in such detail? Let's see if this girl managed to make him proud.

I kept walking, trying to stay clear of Chiron's hooves. "We haven't seen any other centaurs," I observed.

"No," said Chiron sadly. "My kinsmen are a wild and barbaric folk, I'm afraid. You might encounter them in the wilderness, or at major sporting events. But you won't see any here."

Apollo, Hermes and Nico grinned "GO PARTY PONIES!" (A/N: Let's assume, the Party Ponies existed back then) Nico smiled "Percy agrees when he meets then in the future." Apollo and Hermes grinned "Again, Percy in an awesome cousin."

"You said your name was Chiron. Are you really …"

He smiled down at me. "The Chiron from the stories? Trainer of Hercules and all that?"

Hercules smiled proudly.

Zoë rolled her eyes. "That isn't a good thing." She said loud enough for him to hear. Hercules winced a little at her harsh tone.

Yes, Percy, I am."

"But, shouldn't you be dead?"

"No tact." Zoë rolled her eyes.

Jason thought Looks like Chiron isn't too different from Percy. *

Chiron paused, as if the question intrigued him. "I honestly don't know about should be. The truth is, I can't be dead. You see, eons ago the gods granted my wish. I could continue the work I loved. I could be a teacher of heroes as long as humanity needed me. I gained much from that wish … and I gave up much. But I'm still here, so I can only assume I'm still needed."

"You will always be needed." Every demigod except Jason insisted.

I thought about being a teacher for three thousand years. It wouldn't have made my Top Ten Things to Wish For list.
"Or mine." Everyone but Theseus and Athena said.

"Doesn't it ever get boring?"

"No, no," he said. "Horribly depressing, at times, but never boring."

"Why depressing?"

Hades, the Furies and Persephone sighed. That depression was a part of life, but did anyone of them understand? No, they just complained and sulked.

Chiron seemed to turn hard of hearing again.

"Oh, look," he said. "Annabeth is waiting for us."

Aphrodite looked at the book with new interest.

The blond girl I'd met at the Big House was reading a book in front of the last cabin on the left, number eleven.

Hermes grinned widely.

When we reached her, she looked me over critically, like she was still thinking about how much I drooled.

I tried to see what she was reading, but I couldn't make out the title. I thought my dyslexia was acting up. Then I realized the title wasn't even English. The letters looked Greek to me. I mean, literally Greek.

They all rolled their eyes.

"Bad pun Percy." Triton muttered a little absently. Poseidon looked at Triton, it looked as if he was warming up to Percy.

There were pictures of temples and statues and different kinds of columns, like those in an architecture book.

"Annabeth," Chiron said, "I have masters' archery class at noon. Would you take Percy from here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Cabin eleven," Chiron told me, gesturing toward the doorway. "Make yourself at home."

Out of all the cabins, eleven looked the most like a regular old summer camp cabin, with the emphasis on old.

"Hey!" Hermes protested in a hurt voice.

The threshold was worn down, the brown paint peeling. Over the doorway was one of those doctor's symbols, a winged pole with two snakes wrapped around it. What did they call it…?

"A caduceus." Hermes muttered. "George, Martha note to self, check up on the cabin from time to time. And you all." Hermes stared at the other gods "Claim your kids!"
Aphrodite looked thoughtful, "They're at the campfire." She closed her eyes. As she muttered a few words pink smoke went into the braziers and two kids were claimed.

A caduceus.

Inside, it was packed with people, both boys and girls, way more than the number of bunk beds. Sleeping bags were spread all over on the floor. It looked like a gym where the Red Cross had set up an evacuation center.

Hermes glared "Again claim your kids!"

Zeus and Ares did the same and electric blue and red smoke rose into the braziers. A total of seven kids had been claimed in one day. Hermes wasn't exactly impressed yet but it was better than nothing.

The Apollo cabin was starting up the campfire and they had all sat down with some grapes and cheese when a boy and girl form the Hermes cabin were beautified with new clothes and shoes. The boy had shining new weapons hanging from his belt and the girl had jewelry adorning her body. Chiron was about to announce their parentage when two girls and a boy had lightning bolts in a dazzling electric blue on their heads and two boys stood with twin swords bathed in red light.

"All hail Flora and Oftenus daughter and son of Aphrodite, Lady of the doves, goddess of love and beauty.

All hail Lancus and Kompo sons of Ares, Lord of war.

All hail Orchard, Anna, and Rystan daughters and son of Zeus, Lord of the sky, King of the Gods."

At the last three demigods' claiming the entire camp stood up and bowed. Chiron wasn't sure what to make of this, was something about to happen? Tension stared to cloud his mind due to so many demigods being claimed in a single day. "Demigods please join your respective cabin after the campfire."

Chiron didn't go in. The door was too low for him. But when the campers saw him they all stood and bowed respectfully.

"Well, then," Chiron said. "Good luck, Percy. I'll see you at dinner."

He galloped away toward the archery range.

I stood in the doorway, looking at the kids. They weren't bowing anymore. They were staring at me, sizing me up. I knew this routine. I'd gone through it at enough schools.

"Well?" Annabeth prompted. "Go on."

So naturally I tripped coming in the door and made a total fool of myself.

Thalia and Nico sighed both wishing they had been there to witness it.

There were some snickers from the campers, but none of them said anything.

Annabeth announced, "Percy Jackson, meet cabin eleven."
"Regular or undetermined?" somebody asked.

Hermes shot his fellow Olympians a glare.

I didn't know what to say, but Annabeth said, "Undetermined."

Everybody groaned.

The god of travelers pouted. "They wouldn't need to groan if so many of your kids didn't occupy their cabin."

A guy who was a little older than the rest came forward. "Now, now, campers. That's what we're here for. Welcome, Percy. You can have that spot on the floor, right over there."

The guy was about nineteen, and he looked pretty cool. He was tall and muscular, with short-cropped sandy hair and a friendly smile. He wore an orange tank top, cutoffs, sandals, and a leather necklace with five different-colored clay beads. The only thing unsettling about his appearance was a thick white scar that ran from just beneath his right eye to his jaw, like an old knife slash.

Thalia and Nico glared at the book. He might have died a hero but both of them still hated Luke.

"This is Luke," Annabeth said, and her voice sounded different somehow. I glanced over and could've sworn she was blushing.

Thalia sighed "She probably was." Annabeth had been obsessed with Luke until he had actually become Kronos.

She saw me looking, and her expression hardened again. "He's your counselor for now."

"For now?" I asked.

"You're undetermined," Luke explained patiently. "They don't know what cabin to put you in, so you're here. Cabin eleven takes all newcomers, all visitors. Naturally, we would. Hermes, our patron, is the god of travelers."

I looked at the tiny section of floor they'd given me. I had nothing to put there to mark it as my own, no luggage, no clothes, no sleeping bag. Just the Minotaur's horn. I thought about setting that down, but then I remembered that Hermes was also the god of thieves.

"Aww…" Hermes groaned thinking it would look really cool with one of his kids, but he stopped when Poseidon shot him a glare.

I looked around at the campers' faces, some sullen and suspicious, some grinning stupidly, some eyeing me as if they were waiting for a chance to pick my pockets.

"The ones that want to pick your pockets are Hermes' children." Artemis declared matter-of-factly.

The god only laughed in response. "Of course they are!"

"How long will I be here?" I asked.

"How long will that take?"

The campers all laughed.

The gods looked guilty, and the demigods didn't look at them. "Is it really that bad?" Demeter asked and the demigods nodded glaring.

It was the cause of the war, Thalia and Nico thought.

"Come on," Annabeth told me. "I'll show you the volleyball court."

"I've already seen it."

"Come on." She grabbed my wrist and dragged me outside. I could hear the kids of cabin eleven laughing behind me.

When we were a few feet away, Annabeth said, "Jackson, you have to do better than that."

"What?"

She rolled her eyes and mumbled under her breath, "I can't believe I thought you were the one."

"The One," Aphrodite smirked an evil glint appearing in her eyes. Nico glared at her tone of voice. He hated that everyone automatically assumed Percy would get together with Annabeth no matter where they were.

"What's your problem?" I was getting angry now. "All I know is, I kill some bull guy-"

"Don't talk like that!" Annabeth told me. "You know how many kids at this camp wish they'd had your chance?"

"Almost zero, Annie." Thalia rolled her eyes.

"To get killed?"

"To fight the Minotaur! What do you think we train for?"

"To live?" Theseus muttered a little annoyed at the girl.

I shook my head. "Look, if the thing I fought really was the Minotaur, the same one in the stories ..."

"Yes."

"Then there's only one."

"Yes."

"And he died, like, a gajillion years ago, right? Theseus killed him in the labyrinth. So ..."

Theseus smiled, his brother knew about his tale when he apparently sucked at Greek mythology. It was kind of heart warming.
"Monsters don't die, Percy. They can be killed. But they don't die."

"Oh, thanks. That clears it up."

"A lot." Nico rolled his eyes. Tisiphone was slightly amused.

"They don't have souls, like you and me. You can dispel them for a while, maybe even for a whole lifetime if you're lucky. But they are primal forces. Chiron calls them archetypes. Eventually, they re-form."

I thought about Mrs. Dodds. "You mean if I killed one, accidentally, with a sword-"

Alecto frowned annoyed, the demigod brat had gotten her.

"The Fur … I mean, your math teacher. That's right. She's still out there. You just made her very, very mad."

Alecto nodded in agreement. Dark thoughts filled her head as she laughed softly in a maniac matter.

"How did you know about Mrs. Dodds?"

"You talk in your sleep."

"You almost called her something. A Fury? They're Hades' torturers, right?"

"Yes, we are." The furies smiled proudly.

Annabeth glanced nervously at the ground, as if she expected it to open up and swallow her. Hades rolled his eyes "That won't happen. One kid and these people."

Nico looked sheepish. Just one kid and a couple of skeletons. No big deal. He thought.

"You shouldn't call them by name, even here. We call them the Kindly Ones, if we have to speak of them at all."

"Look, is there anything we can say without it thundering?" I sounded whiny, even to myself, Artemis and Zoë were surprised. A man admitting his fault? Well wonders never cease.

but right then I didn't care. "Why do I have to stay in cabin eleven, anyway? Why is everybody so crowded together? There are plenty of empty bunks right over there."

I pointed to the first few cabins, and Annabeth turned pale. "You don't just choose a cabin, Percy. It depends on who your parents are. Or … your parent."

She stared at me, waiting for me to get it.

"My mom is Sally Jackson," I said. "She works at the candy store in Grand Central Station. At least, she used to."

Persephone, Nico and the Furies stared at Hades. Hades ignored their stares and Nico paused realizing something. He felt extremely lucky. Hades still didn't realize, despite the fact Nico was acting like he usually does towards his father.
"I'm sorry about your mom, Percy. But that's not what I mean. I'm talking about your other parent. Your dad."

"He's dead. I never knew him."

Annabeth sighed. Clearly, she'd had this conversation before with other kids.

Hera rolled her eyes "Of course she has. Why? Since you all never learn!"

"Your father's not dead, Percy."

"How can you say that? You know him?"

Poseidon rolled his eyes and sat up in his throne. "As if."

"She's not missing anything." Athena snapped back. She didn't know why but she felt a strange attachment to this Annabeth.

"No, of course not."

"Then how can you say-"

"Because I know you. You wouldn't be here if you weren't one of us."

"That sounds so creepy. You're one of us now." Jason said shuddering. It fit in with his first image of Annabeth, looking wild and frenzied.

"You don't know anything about me."

"No?" She raised an eyebrow. "I bet you moved around from school to school. I bet you were kicked out of a lot of them."

Thalia bit back a smile. "Annie's psychic Percy. Didn't you know?"

"How-"

"Diagnosed with dyslexia. Probably ADHD, too."

I tried to swallow my embarrassment. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Jason rolled his eyes, Percy and I may be on odds at times, but that's got to be rough. He's finding out about all of these things and despite that, Annabeth's being a pain to him and extremely rude.

"Taken together, it's almost a sure sign. The letters float off the page when you read, right? That's because your mind is hardwired for ancient Greek.

"Why?" Thalia questioned never understanding the need for that. "Wouldn't it be better to use English instead?"

When she received blank stares, Thalia remembered this was Ancient Greece and the language English didn't exist yet.

And the ADHD-you're impulsive, can't sit still in the classroom. That's your battlefield reflexes. In a real fight, they'd keep you alive. As for the attention problems, that's because
you see too much, Percy, not too little. Your senses are better than a regular mortal's. Of course the teachers want you medicated. Most of them are monsters. They don't want you seeing them for what they are."

"You sound like … you went through the same thing?"

"Did she?" Jason asked.

Thalia shrugged. "Doubt it. She's probably quoting what the other campers told her." After all, how much of that could a seven-year old little girl have had to go through anyways?

"Most of the kids here did. If you weren't like us, you couldn't have survived the Minotaur, much less the ambrosia and nectar."

"Ambrosia and nectar."

"The food and drink we were giving you to make you better. That stuff would've killed a normal kid. It would've turned your blood to fire and your bones to sand and you'd be dead. Face it. You're a half-blood."

A half-blood.

I was reeling with so many questions I didn't know where to start.

"Start like Nico did." Thalia snickered even as Nico shot her a poisonous glare.

Then a husky voice yelled, "Well! A newbie!"

I looked over. The big girl from the ugly red cabin

Ares glared at the word ugly. Percy was lucky he wasn't here right then, otherwise Ares would have pulverized him.

was sauntering toward us. She had three other girls behind her, all big and ugly and mean looking like her, all wearing camo jackets.

"Clarisse,"

Ares rose a brow releasing some of his afore mentioned tension. Clarisse? Interesting name.

Annabeth sighed. "Why don't you go polish your spear or something?"

"Sure, Miss Princess," the big girl said. "So I can run you through with it Friday night."

Ares grinned, yeah she was alright.

"Erre es korakas!" Annabeth said, which I somehow understood was Greek for 'Go to the crows!' though I had a feeling it was a worse curse than it sounded. "You don't stand a chance."

Everyone looked at the book gravely "It is."

Jason just looked around a little puzzled and bemused.
"We'll pulverize you," Clarisse said, but her eye twitched. Perhaps she wasn't sure she could follow through on the threat. She turned toward me. "Who's this little runt?"


I blinked. "Like … the war god?"

Clarisse sneered. "You got a problem with that?"

"No," I said, recovering my wits. "It explains the bad smell."

"You!" Ares snarled at the book and Jason rose a brow and leaned over to ask Thalia "Does he want to annoy the gods?"

Thalia stared at her brother with a smirk on her face "We suspect that Percy enjoys it."

Clarisse growled. "We got an initiation ceremony for newbies, Prissy."

"Percy."

"Whatever. Come on, I'll show you."

"Clarisse-" Annabeth tried to say.

"Stay out of it, wise girl."

Thalia and Nico cracked up "He got that from CLARISSE?!" They gasped in between laughs.

Nico felt a little better. At least his nickname and Thalia's for that matter were original and most importantly Percy's. He had taken the time to come up with something to call them.

Annabeth looked pained, but she did stay out of it, and I didn’t really want her help. I was the new kid. I had to earn my own rep.

Jason looked at the book. He's right, that's probably how he was able to survive the Roman camp and even become praetor.

I handed Annabeth my minotaur horn and got ready to fight, but before I knew it, Clarisse had me by the neck and was dragging me toward a cinder-block building that I knew immediately was the bathroom.

I was kicking and punching. I'd been in plenty of fights before, but this big girl Clarisse had hands like iron.

Ares had a smug grin on his face. Aphrodite stifled a groan as she caught the look. Now she was going to have to suffer hearing Ares brag about his future daughter. The love goddess wondered if she could find someone else for awhile. Just until Ares' bragging father mode would be over. She glanced at Ares again whose handsome face shot a boyish smile at her, obviously impatient.

Her heart melted and she gave in. After all whenever her children are mentioned, she'd want to brag too.

She dragged me into the girls' bathroom. There was a line of toilets on one side and a line of shower stalls down the other. It smelled just like any public bathroom, and I was thinking-as
much as I could think with Clarisse ripping my hair out—that if this place belonged to the gods, they should've been able to afford classier joints.


Clarisse's friends were all laughing, and I was trying to find the strength I'd used to fight the Minotaur, but it just wasn't there.

"Like he's 'Big Three' material," Clarisse said as she pushed me toward one of the toilets. "Yeah, right. Minotaur probably fell over laughing, he was so stupid looking."

Poseidon glared. Percy was his son, so any insult to Percy was an insult to him. Beside him, Amphitrite rolled her eyes at her husband. He could be just as egoistical if not more than Zeus at times.

Her friends snickered.

Annabeth stood in the corner, watching through her fingers.

Persephone looked at the book disapproving "She could have at least said something to help the poor boy."

Hades, Nico and the Furies stared at her, and Nico looked horrified 'Please, please, please don't support Percy. If you support him...'. Nico let his thoughts trail off as an horrifying image was produced in his mind and he shuddered.

Hades groaned thinking 'My dove, please do not care about another demigod or mortal. Orpheus and Adonis were enough for the millennium.' The Furies were surprised their Lady cared about this demigod already as well.

Clarisse bent me over on my knees and started pushing my head toward the toilet bowl. It reeked like rusted pipes and, well, like what goes into toilets. I strained to keep my head up. I was looking at the scummy water, thinking, I will not go into that. I won't.

Then something happened. I felt a tug in the pit of my stomach.

Ares glared while Poseidon, Triton, Theseus and Orion shared grins. Amphitrite rolled her eyes, My husband and his children...The only thing they can all bond over is all their control over the water.

I heard the plumbing rumble, the pipes shudder. Clarisse's grip on my hair loosened. Water shot out of the toilet, making an arc straight over my head, and the next thing I knew, I was sprawled on the bathroom tiles with Clarisse screaming behind me.

"Clarisse, how are you not dead? Percy's water powers can be pretty deadly." Jason stated remembering all the times, Percy's control over water had come in handy.

I turned just as water blasted out of the toilet again, hitting Clarisse straight in the face so hard it pushed her down onto her butt. The water stayed on her like the spray from a fire hose, pushing her backward into a shower stall.

She struggled, gasping, and her friends started coming toward her. But then the other toilets exploded, too, and six more streams of toilet water blasted them back. The showers acted up,
too, and together all the fixtures sprayed the camouflage girls right out of the bathroom, spinning them around like pieces of garbage being washed away.

Ares glared while everyone especially Hephaestus howled in laughter. Aphrodite gave him sympathetic looks though she was evidently fighting to keep in a smile.

As soon as they were out the door, I felt the tug in my gut lessen, and the water shut off as quickly as it had started.

"Sloppy control, but not bad." Orion complimented.

The entire bathroom was flooded. Annabeth hadn't been spared. She was dripping wet, but she hadn't been pushed out the door. She was standing in exactly the same place, staring at me in shock.

I looked down and realized I was sitting in the only dry spot in the whole room. There was a circle of dry floor around me. I didn't have one drop of water on my clothes. Nothing.

"Of course not. It's one of your powers." Triton stated his tone bored.

I stood up, my legs shaky.

Annabeth said, "How did you …"

"I don't know."

We walked to the door. Outside, Clarisse and her friends were sprawled in the mud, and a bunch of other campers had gathered around to gawk. Clarisse's hair was flattened across her face. Her camouflage jacket was sopping and she smelled like sewage. She gave me a look of absolute hatred. "You are dead, new boy. You are totally dead."

I probably should have let it go, but I said, "You want to gargle with toilet water again, Clarisse? Close your mouth."

Laughter echoed for a full ten minutes. "Percy, doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut, does he?"

Nico shook his head " Holy Zeus, NO!"

Jason felt a little amused but most importantly thankful. If Percy had said anything like that at the Roman camp, he would be dead. Then any reconciliation between the Greeks and the Romans would have been impossible. After all what place would trust the place that hurt their leader. A leader they all very much adored.

Her friends had to hold her back. They dragged her toward cabin five, while the other campers made way to avoid her flailing feet.

Annabeth stared at me. I couldn't tell whether she was just grossed out or angry at me for dousing her.

"Probably both and more." Thalia said trying to stop herself from going into hysterics again.

"What?" I demanded. "What are you thinking?"
"I'm thinking," she said, "that I want you on my team for capture the flag."

"The end of the chapter," Hephaestus announced when everyone stared at him to continue.

"Very good," Hercules said.

Jason was pretty good friends with Percy but he half agreed with Hercules. He had heard about a lot of Percy's heroics. In fact Jason had head about Percy's heroics so much that he was tired of hearing the guy's name. He smiled inwardly, Percy had seemed to be feel the same way when they first met. The guy did seem a little too laid back based on everything people had said. Ah well, read on to find out.

Ariadne stepped forward "Lord Hephaestus, if I may?" Hephaestus handed her the book and Ariadne cleared her throat and started to read… My Dinner Goes Up In Smoke

Chapter End Notes

*As when Jason met Chiron for the first time, the very first thing Chiron told him was 'you should be dead'. The lack of tact is real.

I'm sorry for the late update guys and thank you for the comments! Kudos to those who guessed the blond boy was Jason.

To be honest I found Annabeth being way too harsh to Percy. Yes, she helped him understand he's a demigod but the way she did it, wasn't appropriate if you consider the grief Percy was going through due to his mother's 'death'. What do you all think?
Word of the bathroom incident spread immediately. Wherever I went, campers pointed at me and murmured something about toilet water. Or maybe they were just staring at Annabeth, who was still pretty much dripping wet.

Various gods and demigods laughed outright.

She showed me a few more places: the metal shop (where kids were forging their own swords),

Hephaestus beamed with pride. Those had to be his children, he was certain about it.

the arts- and-crafts room (where satyrs were sandblasting a giant marble statue of a goat-man),

Hermes grinned happily. "Pan!" He exclaimed a burst of happiness escaping him at his son's fame. Hermes was extremely proud and he just had to rub it in Dionysus' face. "Too bad the satyrs will always love Pan more, huh D?"

Dionysus' eyes shot pure venom at the messenger god, but he stayed quiet for his wife's sake. Ariadne gently squeezed his arm, offering her support before she continued to read.

and the climbing wall, which actually consisted of two facing walls that shook violently, dropped boulders, sprayed lava, and clashed together if you didn't get to the top fast enough.

Finally we returned to the canoeing lake, where the trail led back to the cabins.

"I've got training to do," Annabeth said flatly. "Dinner's at seven-thirty. Just follow your cabin to the mess hall."

"Still upset about the toilets?" Nico snickered gleefully. Thalia shot him a strange look but said nothing.

Jason felt even weirder. He knew Nico briefly as the ambassador of Pluto and after rescuing him from those giants, but this Nico was a completely different person. Of course Jason could attribute it to the fact that this Nico had not yet spent time in Tartarus.

"Annabeth, I'm sorry about the toilets."

Zoë and Artemis gasped in utter shock. Their voices were completely synchronized as they whispered absolutely stunned. "A boy can accept his mistakes? It's a lie!" They both announced shocked and outraged.

The rest of the male population in the room sent them sour looks.

"Whatever."

"It wasn't my fault."
They sighed in relief. "All is well with the world."

Zoë added "I was getting worried Lady Artemis." Her Mistress nodded, agreeing whole-heartedly. "I was as well, Zoë."

Apollo frowned at his sister. When she noticed she gave him a look stating that she had spoken nothing but the truth.

She looked at me skeptically, and I realized it was my fault. I'd made water shoot out of the bathroom fixtures. I didn't understand how. But the toilets had responded to me. I had become one with the plumbing.

"You need to talk to the Oracle," Annabeth said.

Apollo clapped gleefully, looking almost giddy. "Ah the Oracle. My Oracle. I can't wait to see what beautiful form she takes on next! To know her virtuous beauty shall never fade, my eternal life is complete!"

Artemis glared at him. "It's complete right? Allow me to end it for you then?" Her bow and arrows shimmered into existence next to her.

At once Apollo snapped out of his dreamy state and straightened. "No thank you little sister. I'll have to decline your offer."

Artemis gave a groan and a lot of protests about how she was the older one and that they were twins. Artemis was dutifully ignored in favor of continuing the book.

"Who?"

"Not who. What.

"What?" Jason asked completely bewildered. Apollo on the other hand was absolutely horrified. "My Oracle! What happens to her?!"

Nico and Thalia gave each other a look and chorused "Spoilers!" Jason stared at them for a minute before giving up.

The Oracle. I'll ask Chiron."

I stared into the lake, wishing somebody would give me a straight answer for once.

I wasn't expecting anybody to be looking back at me from the bottom, so my heart skipped a beat when I noticed two teenage girls sitting cross-legged at the base of the pier, about twenty feet below. They wore blue jeans and shimmering green T-shirts, and their brown hair floated loose around their shoulders as minnows darted in and out. They smiled and waved as if I were a long-lost friend.

"Technically you are." Triton grumbled. The naiads were under his jurisdiction, they should be waving to his mortal half-sibling.

I didn't know what else to do. I waved back.

Amphitrite shook her head disappointedly. Those naiads were her nieces. They really should know better than to act like an immature group of giggling girls.
"Don't encourage them," Annabeth warned. "Naiads are terrible flirts."

Aphrodite smiled gleefully. "Someone's jealous."

"Er...not exactly." Thalia contradicted. At least not at that point in time.

"Naiads," I repeated, feeling completely overwhelmed. "That's it. I want to go home now."

"He lost it because of naiads?" Hercules asked bemused.

Nico shook his head. "He lost his mother because of a minotaur attack and just found out his father is a god. He was processing all of those things and really just hoping it was a massive hallucination. The naiads just put everything in perspective and proved it was reality."

Jason was starting to feel glad that his entire life had consisted of training in camp. He couldn't imagine learning the truth after he had already developed a sense of the world.

Annabeth frowned. "Don't you get it, Percy? You are home. This is the only safe place on earth for kids like us."

"You mean, mentally disturbed kids?"

"Hey!" Every single demigod in the place shout out extremely offended.


"Half-human and half-what?"

"He's still going to deny it?" Dionysus complained.

"He didn't watch the orientation film. It makes sense." Nico said with all seriousness.

The three Furies were becoming rather worried for their future lord's sanity at that point.

"I think you know."

I didn't want to admit it, but I was afraid I did. I felt a tingling in my limbs, a sensation I sometimes felt when my mom talked about my dad.

"God," I said. "Half-god."

"Finally." Several of the occupants in the room groaned. Jason however felt rather sympathetic. He had felt that same unwillingness to accept his surrounding when he woke up on that bus with Leo and Piper without his memories.

Annabeth nodded. "Your father isn't dead, Percy. He's one of the Olympians."

"That's... Crazy."

"Is it? What's the most common thing gods did in the old stories? They ran around falling in love with humans and having kids with them. Do you think they've changed their habits in the last few millennia?"

"I don't like her." Every god who had kids with mortals grumbled. Never mind that she may be one of their own daughters. Her words were extremely insulting. They all filed it under their notes to
"But those are just-" I almost said myths again. Then I remembered Chiron's warning that in two thousand years, I might be considered a myth.

"Ambitious much?" Athena muttered.

"Like you aren't." Triton shot back his voice full of disgust. Athena flushed angrily but kept quiet.

"But if all the kids here are half-gods-"

"Demigods," Annabeth said. "That's the official term. Or half-bloods."

"Then who's your dad?"

At this point all the male gods save Ares leaned forward. Despite everything they were all curious.

Her hands tightened around the pier railing. I got the feeling I'd just trespassed on a sensitive subject.

"My dad is a professor at West Point," she said. "I haven't seen him since I was very small. He teaches American history."

"A mortal? I thought she was a demigod?" Hermes asked confused. "If not her father then..." He trailed off.

"Well, she's not mine." Aphrodite denied. "I know it."

"He's human."

"What? You assume it has to be a male god who finds a human female attractive? How sexist is that?"

"It's true though." Many of the goddesses said under their breaths. The only females who had children were Aphrodite and Demeter. Athena did too, but rarely.

"Who's your mom, then?"

"Cabin six."

"She seems rather...slow." Athena said irritably. Didn't the girl realize the sea-spawn was new to their world?

"Meaning?"


There was a moment of stunned silence. Then many people started roaring in laughter.

Athena blushed a bright tomato red. "Stop it! All of you!" However it was only when Zeus reissued the command, did everyone refrain from pointing out the daughter of Athena's stupidity.

Okay, I thought. Why not?

"What's that supposed to mean?" Athena screeched indignantly.
"That your daughter is exceptionally idiotic." Triton defended his half-brother.

Nico, Thalia and Jason exchanged confused looks. They just didn't understand why Triton hated Athena so much.

"And my dad?"

"Undetermined," Annabeth said, "like I told you before. Nobody knows."

"We~ll," Apollo drawled, "I wouldn't say nobody."

"Except my mother. She knew."

"Maybe not, Percy. Gods don't always reveal their identities."

"My dad would have. He loved her."

Amphitrite glowered at the book. Poseidon was her husband. She didn't entirely mind that he had children with other lovers, but the only one who held his heart was her.

Annabeth gave me a cautious look. She didn't want to burst my bubble.

"That's ironic." Orion remarked. When he got empty looks he explained, "Because Percy is the son of the sea god? No? It's just me?"

At that he got several people nodding at him. He groaned.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe he'll send a sign. That's the only way to know for sure: your father has to send you a sign claiming you as his son. Sometimes it happens."

The gods who had children flinched. They hated it when mortals and demigods pointed out their flaws. That's why they kept turning them into strange creatures.

Artemis and Hera laughed under their breaths. They all deserved to be told off.

"You mean sometimes it doesn't?"

Annabeth ran her palm along the rail. "The gods are busy. They have a lot of kids and they don't always ... Well, sometimes they don't care about us, Percy. They ignore us."

I thought about some of the kids I'd seen in the Hermes cabin, teenagers who looked sullen and depressed, as if they were waiting for a call that would never come. I'd known kids like that at Yancy Academy, shuffled off to boarding school by rich parents who didn't have the time to deal with them. But gods should behave better.

The gods flinched again. Hestia hid a smile at that. If she had known a future book written by a future demigod would be the start of their guilt trip into paying more attention to their children...Well, she would have found this book and forced them all to read it ages ago.

"So I'm stuck here," I said. "That's it? For the rest of my life?"

"It depends," Annabeth said. "Some campers only stay the summer. If you're a child of Aphrodite or Demeter, you're probably not a real powerful force."
"Excuse me?!" The two goddesses raged. They swore if they ever met this Annabeth, they would teach her, who isn't a powerful force. In the meantime, they exchanged looks. They would do their best to make Athena's life miserable. Athena recognized that look and instantly looked weary. She knew that those two goddesses were extremely stubborn, they wouldn't let go of this insult any time soon.

The monsters might ignore you, so you can get by with a few months of summer training and live in the mortal world the rest of the year. But for some of us, it's too dangerous to leave. We're year-rounders. In the mortal world, we attract monsters. They sense us. They come to challenge us. Most of the time, they'll ignore us until we're old enough to cause trouble about ten or eleven years old, but after that, most demigods either make their way here, or they get killed off. A few manage to survive in the outside world and become famous. Believe me, if I told you the names, you'd know them. Some don't even realize they're demigods. But very, very few are like that."

"So monsters can't get in here?"

"No." Theseus shook his head. "It's a great help, when you just want to train."

Annabeth shook her head. "Not unless they're intentionally stocked in the woods or specially summoned by somebody on the inside."

"Why would anybody want to summon a monster?"

"Practice fights. Practical jokes."

"Practical jokes?"

"Jokes are fun!" Hermes defended.

"The point is, the borders are sealed to keep mortals and monsters out. From the outside, mortals look into the valley and see nothing unusual, just a strawberry farm."

They all glanced at Demeter. They had the feeling the strawberries were her idea. Then they turned to Dionysus. He had probably reinforced her suggestion.

"So... You're a year-rounder?"

Annabeth nodded. From under the collar of her T-shirt she pulled a leather necklace with five clay beads of different colors. It was just like Luke's, except Annabeth's also had a big gold ring strung on it, like a college ring.

"I've been here since I was seven," she said. "Every August, on the last day of summer session, you get a bead for surviving another year.


"It's like a rite of passage. Plus it helps people identify how long you've been at camp. The longer you've been there, the more authority you have." Thalia explained. Perseus nodded in understanding.

I've been here longer than most of the counselors, and they're all in college."

"Why did you come so young?"
Thalia winced at that. "He shouldn't have asked that."

"Why?" Athena questioned, a little concerned for her future daughter. Thalia hesitated. "It's er...complicated."

She twisted the ring on her necklace. "None of your business."

"Oh." I stood there for a minute in uncomfortable silence. "So... I could just walk out of here right now if I wanted to?"

"He was thinking of leaving that soon?" Jason asked a little surprised. The he shrugged and muttered, "Not that I blame him."

Thalia shot him an exasperated look.

"It would be suicide, but you could, with Mr. D's or Chiron's permission. But they wouldn't give permission until the end of the summer session unless..."

"Unless?"

"A quest." Everyone present in the throne room chorused somberly.

"You were granted a quest. But that hardly ever happens. The last time..."

Her voice trailed off. I could tell from her tone that the last time hadn't gone well.

Jason looked around. "What happened the last time?" he questioned. Nico shrugged not knowing the story himself.

They both turned to Thalia, but she looked just as lost as they felt.

"Back in the sick room, " I said, "when you were feeding me that stuff-"

"Ambrosia." Apollo sighed. "I'm hungry."

"We should take a break soon." Zeus admitted. It had been a long meeting even before they started the books.

"After two more chapters?" Aphrodite suggested. They all approved the plan.

"Ambrosia."

"Yeah. You asked me something about the summer solstice."

Everyone straightened, their interest piqued. It was all going down for this.

Annabeth's shoulders tensed. "So you do know something?"

"Well... No. Back at my old school, I overheard Grover and Chiron talking about it. Grover mentioned the summer solstice. He said something like we didn't have much time, because of the deadline.

"The deadline. It has to be connected to the Olympians in some way." Megaera muttered deep in thought.
"But if it were just the Olympians, why would our lord ask me to attack the boy?" Alecto pointed out.

What did that mean?"

She clenched her fists. "I wish I knew. Chiron and the satyrs, they know, but they won't tell me.

"Of course they know. And why would tell you? What makes you so special?" Zeus sneered at the book.

The gods and demigods around him tried not to look at him. If they did, they knew the king of the gods would realize that they all thought he was acting completely insane.

**Something is wrong in Olympus, something pretty major. Last time I was there, everything seemed so normal.**"

"You've been to Olympus?" Jason asked shocked.

"You're on Olympus right now." Theseus pointed out.

"Yeah, but these are special circumstances. And in the past! They went just for a visit?"

"Special privileges, I suppose." Thalia told him loftily.

"You've been to Olympus?"

"Some of us year-rounders, Luke

Thalia stiffened. It was too soon. It really was too soon. Even though she knew he would be a part of this book, she was still unprepared.

and Clarisse and I and a few others-we took a field trip during winter solstice. That's when the gods have their big annual council."

"But... How did you get there?"

"The Long Island Railroad, of course. You get off at Penn Station. Empire State Building, special elevator to the six hundredth floor." She looked at me like she was sure I must know this already. "You are a New Yorker, right?"

"Is this girl an idiot?" Hercules asked completely stunned by her lack of knowledge. "I doubt ordinary mortals know the entrance to Mount Olympus, no matter how much the world changes."

No one could defend Annabeth. Not even her own future mother.

"Oh, sure. " As far as I knew, there were only a hundred and two floors in the Empire State Building, but I decided not to point that out.

"He should have. She might have been able to see reality that way." Alecto said snidely.

"Right after we visited," Annabeth continued, "the weather got weird, as if the gods had started fighting. A couple of times since, I've overheard satyrs talking. The best I can figure out is that something important was stolen."
"Stolen? From Olympus?!” Zeus thundered.

Everyone else was silent, stunned. Who would be audacious enough to steal from the gods? Something important enough to cause a fight?

And if it isn’t returned by summer solstice, there’s going to be trouble. When you came, I was hoping ... I mean, Athena can get along with just about anybody,

"Anybody?" Everyone in the throne room echoed. It was rather obvious other than Zeus, just about everyone else tolerated her at best. except for Ares. And of course she's got the rivalry with Poseidon. But, I mean, aside from that, I thought we could work together.

"No." Many gods and goddesses rejected.

Athena stared at them. "Excuse me?"


I thought you might know something. "

"That'll be the day." Athena mocked, trying to shake off the shock she had just received. Did her fellow Olympians really dislike her that much?

"Better than your daughter." Poseidon defended. Athena glared at him, but was too hurt to muster up a fight.

I shook my head. I wished I could help her, but I felt too hungry and tired and mentally overloaded to ask any more questions.

"I've got to get a quest," Annabeth muttered to her-self. "I'm not too young. If they would just tell me the problem..."

"You'd fail epically." Thalia deadpanned. "At least alone." When Thalia had been reunited with Annabeth, she had thought the daughter of Athena was far too reckless and made decisions based on emotions rather than wit.

I could smell barbecue smoke coming from somewhere nearby. Annabeth must've heard my stomach growl. She told me to go on, she’d catch me later. I left her on the pier, tracing her finger across the rail as if drawing a battle plan.

There was that. Athena straightened, pushing away the feelings she had gained by hearing what the other gods and goddesses thought about her.

Back at cabin eleven, everybody was talking and horsing around, waiting for dinner. For the first time, I noticed that a lot of the campers had similar features: sharp noses, upturned eyebrows, mischievous smiles. They were the kind of kids that teachers would peg as troublemakers.

Hermes beamed as he heard about his children. "Ah, I love them already." He sighed happily.

Thankfully, nobody paid much attention to me as I walked over to my spot on the floor and
plopped down with my minotaur horn.

The counselor, Luke, came over. He had the Hermes family resemblance, too. It was marred by that scar on his right cheek, but his smile was intact.

"That's good. I wonder how he got that scar though." Hermes said thoughtfully.

"Maybe he went on a quest?" Persephone suggested kindly. Her half-brother had become one of her closest friends.

Hermes grinned at her before Ares burst his bubble. "Or maybe, it was just a monster attack."

"No one asked you." Hermes glared. Ares just laughed.

"Found you a sleeping bag, " he said. "And here, I stole you some toiletries from the camp store. "

"That's my boy!" Hermes cheered him on.

I couldn't tell if he was kidding about the stealing part.

"Not if he's Hermes' son." Apollo shook his head wearily. "I still remember. My poor cows."

Hermes laughed at him. "That was centuries ago. Forget about it."

"I can't!" Apollo pouted.

I said, "Thanks."

"No prob. '' Luke sat next to me, pushed his back against the wall. "Tough first day?"

"I don't belong here, " I said. "I don't even believe in gods."

"Not that again!" The gods all groaned. That discussion was seriously getting old.

"Yeah, " he said. "That's how we all started. Once you start believing in them? It doesn't get any easier. "

"Why would he say that?" Hermes asked tearfully.

Artemis rolled her eyes. "Because idiot, those children feel lonely. They never actually meet their parents, so they never know if you approve of them!" She had plenty of demigods in the Hunt who felt that way.

The other gods all looked surprised. So were Thalia and Nico. They hadn't expected any of the gods to know that. Actually finding out some of them knew, made them angry. A war could have been avoided. Well, that's what these books were for.

The bitterness in his voice surprised me, because Luke seemed like a pretty easygoing guy. He looked like he could handle just about anything.

"So your dad is Hermes?" I asked.

He pulled a switchblade out of his back pocket, and for a second I thought he was going to gut me,
Nico and Thalia glared at the book, startling Ariadne a little, as she was the one holding the book. but he just scraped the mud off the sole of his sandal. "Yeah. Hermes."

"The wing-footed messenger guy."

"Thanks." Hermes said dryly.


I figured Luke didn't mean to call me a nobody. He just had a lot on his mind.

"He sure did." Thalia muttered. Jason looked at her curiously. He wanted to know why his sister kept reacting to this Luke in that upset manner.

"You ever meet your dad?" I asked.

"Once."

I waited, thinking that if he wanted to tell me, he'd tell me. Apparently, he didn't.

Now Thalia winced. "He wouldn't." She agreed, remembering how the confrontation had happened. Hermes looked upset at the thought his son hadn't liked meeting him.

I wondered if the story had anything to do with how he got his scar.

At Hermes' horrified expression, Thalia hurried to reassure him. "No! No, of course not!"

Luke looked up and managed a smile. "Don't worry about it, Percy. The campers here, they're mostly good people. After all, we're extended family, right? We take care of each other."

"Yeah right." Nico glared angrily.

The others were extremely confused. Just what had Luke done?

He seemed to understand how lost I felt, and I was grateful for that, because an older guy like him—even if he was a counselor—should've steered clear of an uncool middle-schooler like me. But Luke had welcomed me into the cabin. He'd even stolen me some toiletries, which was the nicest thing anybody had done for me all day.

"I would've if I had been there!" Thalia and Nico protested simultaneously.

"Where were you two?" Jason asked.

"I was a tree."

"In a hotel."

Jason started to wish he hadn't asked.

I decided to ask him my last big question, the one that had been bothering me all afternoon.
"Clarisse, from Ares, was joking about me being 'Big Three' material.

"You are." Amphitrite said, a little reluctant.

Then Annabeth ... Twice, she said I might be 'the one.'

Aphrodite swooned at the thought of another couple.

The others stared at her. "Um, don't you think that Annabeth is too...rude to end up with Percy?" Hephaestus asked his wife uncertainly. She glared at him.

"There's a fine line between love and hate." Ares offered smirking. Aphrodite beamed at him and hugged his arm. Ares brought her closer to him allowing her hair to fall all over his chest. Hephaestus watched in disgust.

She said I should talk to the Oracle. What was that all about?"


"That's not nice." Apollo pouted.

"No offense, Lord Apollo. But prophecies are a tad...irritating." Perseus told him. Apollo just laughed.

"No, they are a constant source of amusement." The demigods in the room scowled a little. They had nearly died numerous times due to those prophecies.

"What do you mean?"

His face twitched around the scar. "Let's just say I messed things up for everybody else. The last two years, ever since my trip to the Garden of the Hesperides"

Hercules and Zoë both looked up sharply, a flood of memories coming in.

Artemis glanced at her lieutenant worried for her mental state. It couldn't be easy, having to be near the man that broke her heart.

went sour, Chiron hasn't allowed any more quests. Annabeth's been dying to get out into the world. She pestered Chiron so much he finally told her he already knew her fate. He'd had a prophecy from the Oracle. He wouldn't tell her the whole thing, but he said Annabeth wasn't destined to go on a quest yet. She had to wait until... Somebody special came to the camp."

Nico glared at the book. What was that supposed to mean? Annabeth and Percy were destined to be together?

Aphrodite seemed to be thinking the same thoughts as she giggled happily. "I'm going to have so much fun with his love life." She declared.

"Poor Percy." Jason and Theseus muttered.

"Somebody special?"

"Don't worry about it, kid," Luke said. "Annabeth wants to think every new camper who comes through here is the omen she's been waiting for."
"That's really stupid." Artemis sighed. Athena wordlessly demanded an answer.

"She's acting like a helpless girl who cannot do anything without the help of a man. If she wants to prove her training worthy and leave camp, she could always join the Hunt."

**Now, come on, it's dinnertime.**

The moment he said it, a horn blew in the distance. Somehow, I knew it was a conch shell, even though I'd never heard one before.

"It's the sea in you." All of Poseidon's children, Amphitrite and Poseidon said, a little smug.

**Luke yelled, "Eleven, fall in!"**

The whole cabin, about twenty of us,

"Only twenty? My, you all have cut down on having children." Hera sneered.

The others were unable to defend themselves. They had many, many unclaimed children at the moment.

filed into the commons yard. We lined up in order of seniority, so of course I was dead last. Campers came from the other cabins, too, except for the three empty cabins at the end, and cabin eight, which had looked normal in the daytime, but was now starting to glow silver as the sun went down.

Some of the other gods frowned a little worried. Artemis and Hera were normal. But for Poseidon and Zeus to not have children? Unbelievable.

We marched up the hill to the mess hall pavilion. Satyrs joined us from the meadow. Naiads emerged from the canoeing lake. A few other girls came out of the woods- and when I say out of the woods, I mean straight out of the woods.

"Dryads." Dionysus said tiredly. Many of his Maenads were dryads. They knew how to party. He sort of missed them now.

I saw one girl, about nine or ten years old, melt from the side of a maple tree and come skipping up the hill.

"You never know how old they are." Persephone muttered, glaring a little at her husband.

"What?" Hades defended.

"Minthe." Was all she said.

Hades groaned. Make one mistake and the wife never let you forget it.

In all, there were maybe a hundred campers, a few dozen satyrs, and a dozen assorted wood nymphs and naiads.

Persephone glared remembering Minthe.

"She's a plant. For life. Please let it go, my precious flora."
Hearing the nickname Hades had come up with for her, Persephone relaxed. She gripped his arm. "You are my husband. And my husband alone. Remember that." She whispered seriously. Hades smiled in acceptance.

At the pavilion, torches blazed around the marble columns. A central fire burned in a bronze brazier the size of a bathtub. Each cabin had its own table, covered in white cloth trimmed in purple. Four of the tables were empty, but cabin eleven's was way overcrowded. I had to squeeze on to the edge of a bench with half my butt hanging off.

I saw Grover sitting at table twelve with Mr. D, a few satyrs, and a couple of plump blond boys who looked just like Mr. D.

"I have children?" Dionysus sat up in surprise.

Ariadne looked at him, hiding the fact she was upset. Of course he would have children with another woman. It was to be expected.

Chiron stood to one side, the picnic table being way too small for a centaur.

Annabeth sat at table six with a bunch of serious-looking athletic kids, all with her gray eyes and honey-blond hair.

"Where do they get their hair from?" Orion wondered idly.

Clarisse sat behind me at Ares's table. She'd apparently gotten over being hosed down, because she was laughing and belching right alongside her friends.

Ares grinned proudly, unaware that Aphrodite was not impressed. In fact to retaliate that he was so proud of his future children, she had already planned she would spend the night with one of her worshippers. He had offered enough to win her favor.

Finally, Chiron pounded his hoof against the marble floor of the pavilion, and everybody fell silent. He raised a glass. "To the gods!"

Everybody else raised their glasses. "To the gods!"

They were all rather proud and smug. The demigods deadpanned seeing them so happy at getting offerings from their children.

Wood nymphs came forward with platters of food: grapes, apples, strawberries, cheese, fresh bread, and yes, barbecue! My glass was empty, but Luke said, "Speak to it. Whatever you want, nonalcoholic, of course."

Dionysus sighed unhappily. "Way to take the fun out of it."

I said, "Cherry Coke."

The glass filled with sparkling caramel liquid.

Then I had an idea. "Blue Cherry Coke."

"Sally would love that." Thalia smiled.

Nico nodded in agreement. Jason made a mental note to meet Sally Jackson one day.
The soda turned a violent shade of cobalt.

I took a cautious sip. Perfect.

I drank a toast to my mother.

"What a loyal son." Hera sighed. What she would give to have a son like that.

She's not gone, I told myself. Not permanently, anyway. She's in the Underworld. And if that's a real place, then someday...

Hades, Persephone, the Furies and Nico all groaned collectively.

"If she's dead, he can't bring her back." Hades said. He was getting tired of people trying to stroll into the Underworld and just demand for the souls of their dead family members.

"Here you go, Percy, " Luke said, handing me a platter of smoked brisket.

I loaded my plate and was about to take a big bite when I noticed everybody getting up, carrying their plates toward the fire in the center of the pavilion. I wondered if they were going for dessert or something.

"They're giving offerings." Jason said, remembering his time at Camp Half-Blood. It was a good idea. Maybe that's why the gods gave the Greeks so much leeway.

"Come on, " Luke told me.

As I got closer, I saw that everyone was taking a portion of their meal and dropping it into the fire, the ripest straw-berry, the juiciest slice of beef, the warmest, most buttery roll.

Luke murmured in my ear, "Burnt offerings for the gods. They like the smell. "

"We do?" Demeter asked.

"We think so." Thalia responded.

"It's not the smell. The offerings give us power because it means people still believe and worship us," Hestia explained kindly.

"You're kidding."

His look warned me not to take this lightly, but I couldn't help wondering why an immortal, all-powerful being would like the smell of burning food.

People held back laughter. When Percy put it that way, it did sound rather ridiculous.

Luke approached the fire, bowed his head, and tossed in a cluster of fat red grapes. "Hermes."

I was next.

I wished I knew what god's name to say.

"Sorry, cousin. Uncle Poseidon has a flair for the dramas." Ares laughed.
Poseidon glared at the god of war.

**Finally, I made a silent plea. Whoever you are, tell me. Please.**

"He probably will soon." Triton muttered. His father cared about his demigod children enough to do that.

I scraped a big slice of brisket into the flames.

**When I caught a whiff of the smoke, I didn't gag.**

It smelled nothing like burning food. It smelled of hot chocolate and fresh-baked brownies, hamburgers on the grill and wildflowers, and a hundred other good things that shouldn't have gone well together, but did. I could almost believe the gods could live off that smoke.

"No. Again we still need nectar and ambrosia. The offerings just give us additional power." Zeus rolled his eyes.

No one told him, he was talking to a book. And that the book couldn't hear him.

When everybody had returned to their seats and finished eating their meals, Chiron pounded his hoof again for our attention.

Mr. D got up with a huge sigh. "Yes, I suppose I'd better say hello to all you brats. Well, hello.

"You are a horrible camp director." Hermes blandly told him.

"You just realized?" Dionysus asked the god of thieves incredulously.

**Our activities director, Chiron, says the next capture the flag is Friday. Cabin five presently holds the laurels. **

A bunch of ugly cheering rose from the Ares table.

Ares scowled and smiled at the same time. He was proud his children were the victors, but at the same time the sea punk had just insulted his children.

"Personally," Mr. D continued, "I couldn't care less, but congratulations. Also, I should tell you that we have a new camper today. Peter Johnson."

"That's what you are going to do?" Hephaestus asked his half-brother.

Dionysus nodded determinedly.

**Chiron murmured something.**

"Er, Percy Jackson," Mr. D corrected. "That's right. Hurrah, and all that. Now run along to your silly campfire. Go on."

Thalia, Nico and Jason all sighed. Mr. D would always be irritable when it came to Camp Half-Blood.

Everybody cheered. We all headed down toward the amphitheater, where Apollo's cabin led a sing-along.
Apollo grinned. Of course his children did. He was the god of music after all.

Artemis rolled her eyes, seeing her twin puff up with pride.

We sang camp songs about the gods and ate s'mores and joked around, and the funny thing was, I didn't feel that anyone was staring at me anymore. I felt that I was home.

"You are."

Thalia and Nico both knew that for Percy, home was with the people he loved and cherished. That made them a little happy but they were sad too. They both weren't there yet.

Later in the evening, when the sparks from the campfire were curling into a starry sky, the conch horn blew again, and we all filed back to our cabins. I didn't realize how exhausted I was until I collapsed on my borrowed sleeping bag.

My fingers curled around the Minotaur's horn. I thought about my mom, but I had good thoughts: her smile, the bedtime stories she would read me when I was a kid, the way she would tell me not to let the bedbugs bite.

"He is the ideal son." Hera smiled. Then she frowned. She really wished she had even a single child like that.

When I closed my eyes, I fell asleep instantly.

That was my first day at Camp Half-Blood.

I wish I'd known how briefly I would get to enjoy my new home.

"What?!” Many people cried out. "Why?"

"I don't know." Ariadne told them. "That was the end of the chapter."

"I'll read the next chapter." Zoë offered. It would help take her mind off of her former sisters and the betrayal he had caused her.

Ariadne handed her the book and Zoë cleared her throat....We Capture A Flag

Chapter End Notes

Okay good news first, this chapter is the last chapter without Percy Jackson. He comes back in the next chapter! Yay! Thalia and Nico will be doing some more...time travel let's say. That'll be fun to do.

In case you were wondering about Minthe. Long story short, she was a nymph Hades had a thing for, and when Persephone found out she pulled a Hera. Minthe turned into a plant (mint) and when Persephone got violent on her, a sweet minty aroma was released.
Ha no pun intended. Anyways, leave a comment and enjoy the chapter!
Zoë opened her mouth to start reading when a bright golden flash interrupted her. A raven-haired boy fell down on his knees and groaned loudly.

"Where am I?" He asked as he slowly got up and started to look around him. His sea-green eyes first fell on Nico.

"Nico?" Then he saw Thalia and Jason. He did a quick 180, and saw that he was on Olympus. "Um...sorry. Why are we here?"

"Don't you remember? We came to read about your life." Athena told him harshly, muttering insults under her breath.

To his credit, Percy didn't look even the slightest bit daunted. Instead his eyes widened in realization. "Right. I remember now."

"Bad memory?" Jason asked a knowing smirk on his face. Percy seemed to realize Jason's hidden message and nodded. "Amnesia sucks dude."

Nico looked between the two. "You two know each other?"

"Yes/Not really." Came the immediate reply.

"I know him, but I guess he doesn't quite know me. Yet." Percy clarified. Jason nodded in agreement. Nico watched the two interact like they've known each other forever, and uneasily nodded. "Right."

The gods who had been watching this exchange, coughed loudly to gain everyone else's attention. The future demigods turned to them with a curious gaze. Zeus began, "If you're all quite done, may we continue?" His voice held a sharp edge.

Hera added, "After this chapter we'll take a short break. You can have a proper reunion then." Her tone was motherly, conveying that she had quite taken to Percy.

The boy in question grinned easily, though if anyone had been closely watching, they would have noticed that he kept his hand in the pocket containing Riptide at all times and that his eyes held a haunted look in them. "Well then, lets read!"

Zoë glared at him, but picked up the book regardless...We Capture A Flag, she repeated forcefully.

The next few days I settled into a routine that felt almost normal, if you don't count the fact that I was getting lessons from satyrs, nymphs, and a centaur.

There was a chorus of "That is normal." Percy waved them off.

Each morning I took Ancient Greek from Annabeth, and we talked about the gods and goddesses in the present tense, which was kind of weird. I discovered Annabeth was right about my dyslexia: Ancient Greek wasn't that hard for me to read. At least, no harder than English.

"Such an improvement." Thalia teased.
Percy rolled his eyes at her, and leaned closer to Jason whispering "I prefer Latin."

Jason nodded, and the two boys fist-bumped.

After a couple of mornings, I could stumble through a few lines of Homer without too much headache.

"Homer?" Theseus asked curiously.

"He's a poet, who wrote stories of your adventures." Thalia explained.

The rest of the day, I'd rotate through outdoor activities, looking for something I was good at. Chiron tried to teach me archery,

Orion perked up, wondering if any of his other brothers had skill even slightly similar to his.

but we found out pretty quick I wasn't any good with a bow and arrow.

"Any good?" Thalia smirked.

"Shut up," Percy grumbled blushing a bright pink.

He didn't complain, even when he had to de-snag a stray arrow out of his tail.

Nico winced, "Poor Chiron."

Jason stared at Percy, he was suddenly very thankful the Romans viewed archers as cowards, unless they were the children of Apollo. Needless to say, Orion was sorry he had gotten his hopes up.

"The children of Poseidon are usually bad at archery. Don't take it personally." Triton told him. Percy blinked, his mouth going slack in utter shock.

"You've been gone awhile." Thalia smiled at him.

"Story of my life." Percy muttered, not noticing the startled looks on his friends' faces.

Foot racing? No good either. The wood-nymph instructors left me in the dust. They told me not to worry about it. They'd had centuries of practice running away from lovesick gods.

The lovesick gods in question all blushed furiously. Hera glared darkly at Zeus, but otherwise kept quiet.

Apollo though, looked a little downcast. It hadn't been that long since Dap-she had chosen to be a tree, than to be with him.

But still, it was a little humiliating to be slower than a tree.

Everyone paused. When Percy put it that way...Everyone who hadn't committed the fault burst out in hysterics.

And wrestling? Forget it. Every time I got on the mat, Clarisse would pulverize me.

Ares grinned proudly, remembering that she was his kid. Then he glanced at Aphrodite who was frowning at him slightly.
"There's more where that came from, punk," she'd mumble in my ear.

"Know what? I actually miss Clarisse." Percy said fondly. Ares narrowed his eyes at him, as the future demigods looked at Percy as though he was insane.

"I know what you mean." Jason nodded. "Even though Octavian does nothing but insult me, I miss his sarcastic comments."

"You miss Octavian? Wow you must've been homesick." Jason nodded, grinning at Percy's disbelief.

The only thing I really excelled at was canoeing, and that wasn't the kind of heroic skill people expected to see from the kid who had beaten the Minotaur.

"No need to get too full of yourself." Thalia muttered half-heartedly. She mouthed 'Clarisse?' at Percy, shaking her head to emphasize her confusion.

I knew the senior campers and counselors were watching me, trying to decide who my dad was, but they weren't having an easy time of it. I wasn't as strong as the Ares kids,

"Got that right, boy." Ares smirked.

Nico glanced at Percy, who was trying to hide a smug smile. That was right, he wasn't as strong. He was stronger.

or as good at archery as the Apollo kids.

Percy cringed. "Archery and I...we hate each other."

"Only a boy, would think an inanimate object would hate him. As if it could even care about thou." Zoë told him, pausing in her reading. Percy raised his hands, in a surrender motion.

I didn't have Hephaestus's skill with metalwork

"No, that's Leo's thing." Jason joked.

Percy grinned. "Leo is awesome."

"Who?" Thalia asked. The two male demigods exchanged glances.

"A friend." Was their only answer.

or—gods forbid— Dionysus's way with vine plants.

"Trust me, I would kill you, if you were my son." Dionysus drawled. Ariadne mouthed 'He wouldn't,' but it was easy to tell even she didn't believe it entirely.

Luke told me I might be a child of Hermes, a kind of jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

"Should I feel hurt?" Hermes asked.

"No?" Amphitrite answered. "If you were good at only one thing, what use would that be?"

"True!" Hermes brightened. "I'm the god of travelers, always trying new stuff. Sticking to one thing is boring." Artemis wisely kicked Apollo, when he opened his mouth to remind Hermes, he was
awesome at many things.

But I got the feeling he was just trying to make me feel better. He really didn't know what to
make of me either.

"We still don't." Jason joked. Nico stared at him, watching Percy pretend to be offended.

"When did Percy meet m-Jason?" Thalia whispered, and all Nico could do was shrug.

Despite all that, I liked camp. I got used to the morning fog over the beach, the smell of hot
strawberry fields in the afternoon, even the weird noises of monsters in the woods at night. I
would eat dinner with cabin eleven, scrape part of my meal into the fire, and try to feel some
connection to my real dad.

Poseidon winced. That was something all of his children wanted, the one thing he couldn't give.

Nothing came. Just that warm feeling I'd always had, like the memory of his smile. I tried not
to think too much about my mom, but I kept wondering: if gods and monsters were real, if all
this magical stuff was possible, surely there was some way to save her, to bring her back...

"Tell me you didn't." Hades groaned. He was so tired of heroes thinking they could just come in and
bring people back to life.

Percy shrugged. "Spoilers."

Thalia and Nico sighed. That was going to get old. Fast.

I started to understand Luke's bitterness and how he seemed to resent his father, Hermes.

There wasn't a person present, who didn't flinch. They all had parent issues. The gods with children,
leveled a scathing glare at Zeus.

So okay, maybe gods had important things to do. But couldn't they call once in a while, or
thunder, or something? Dionysus could make Diet Coke appear out of thin air. Why couldn't
my dad, whoever he was, make a phone appear?

"Ancient laws." Several gods spit out hatefully. "Zeus' ancient laws." Hades reminded, enjoying his
brother's discomfort.

The demigods all hid their surprise. They had no idea, that their parents actually cared.

Thursday afternoon, three days after I'd arrived at Camp Half-Blood, I had my first sword-
fighting lesson. Everybody from cabin eleven gathered in the big circular arena, where Luke
would be our instructor.

"Is this entire book going to be about Luke?" Nico rolled his eyes.

Thalia groaned. "I hope not." She looked at Percy, who shrugged refusing to give anything away.
Jason stared at the three for a moment. He hesitated then started, "Um...what's the deal with this

"Its a long story." Came the answer from the Greek trio.

We started with basic stabbing and slashing, using some straw-stuffed dummies in Greek
I got a little more battered and bruised. "Keep your guard up, Percy," he'd say, then whap me in the ribs with the flat of his blade. "$No, not that far up!" Whap! "$Lunge!" Whap! "$Now, back!" Whap!

"My son is really good." Hermes said in astonishment.

"You sound surprised?" Demeter asked him in disapproval. She liked Hermes, she didn't want him to beat himself down.

"Well yeah, my children are usually the non-violent type. So for him to be that good, and others acknowledging him? Its incredible." Demeter understood. Her children were the same.

By the time he called a break, I was soaked in sweat. Everybody swarmed the drinks cooler. Luke poured ice water on his head, which looked like such a good idea, I did the same.

Instantly, I felt better. Strength surged back into my arms. The sword didn't feel so awkward.
"The power of the sea." Amphitrite said. Though that wasn't all, and everyone that was even the slightest bit connected to the ocean knew it. Percy was incredibly powerful if a little bit of water was able to help him that much.

A fact that he seemed remarkably ignorant to.

"Okay, everybody circle up!" Luke ordered. "If Percy doesn't mind, I want to give you a little demo."

Great, I thought. Let's all watch Percy get pounded.

There was laughter at that.

The Hermes guys gathered around. They were suppressing smiles. I figured they'd been in my shoes before and couldn't wait to see how Luke used me for a punching bag.

"I taught him everything he knows." Thalia's voice was a mixture of smugness and disgust.

"You did a good job." Nico noted wryly. She shrugged in reply.

"This is difficult," he stressed. "I've had it used against me. No laughing at Percy, now. Most swordsmen have to work years to master this technique."

"How long did it take you?" Ares questioned Percy.

"First time." He replied bluntly.

Ares nodded. "The water. Of course."

The boy shrugged. "Still counts."

He demonstrated the move on me in slow motion. Sure enough, the sword clattered out of my hand.

"Now in real time," he said, after I'd retrieved my weapon. "We keep sparring until one of us pulls it off. Ready, Percy?"

"How about a bet?" Apollo asked conspiratorially. Artemis kicked him. "Idiot. Percy already said he got in, on his first try."

Apollo slumped. "You couldn't have waited for the reveal?"

"Blame Ares." Percy shrugged.
I nodded, and Luke came after me. Somehow, I kept him from getting a shot at the hilt of my sword. My senses opened up. I saw his attacks coming. I countered. I stepped forward and tried a thrust of my own. Luke deflected it easily, but I saw a change in his face. His eyes narrowed, and he started to press me with more force.

"And this is you without any real training?" Theseus asked, an idea of how powerful his half-brother was forming in his mind.

Percy nodded silently. His eyes flickered between Theseus, Ariadne and Dionysus. There was so much history in this room. And the tension was palpable now that he remembered everything.

The sword grew heavy in my hand. The balance wasn't right. I knew it was only a matter of seconds before Luke took me down, so I figured, What the heck?

I tried the disarming maneuver.

My blade hit the base of Luke's and I twisted, putting my whole weight into a downward thrust.

Clang.

Luke's sword rattled against the stones. The tip of my blade was an inch from his undefended chest.

"If only you had run him through then and there." Nico muttered softly.

"A lost opportunity." Thalia agreed from beside him.

"You two realize, we would never have met each other if that had happened?"

"What?" The two shouted, drawing everyone's attention towards them. "I'll explain later." Percy promised, nodding towards Zoë indicating she should continue reading.

The girl scowled at him, but complied.

The other campers were silent.

I lowered my sword. "Um, sorry."

For a moment, Luke was too stunned to speak.

"If you were able to do that, on your first try," Jason said slowly, "no wonder you became praetor in 8 months."

"Actually it was in a week. Well really a couple of days since there was a quest and all, but I was only a "roman" demigod for a week. Not including my time with Lupa."

"A week." Jason said incredulously. "How good are you?"

"Sorry?" His scarred face broke into a grin. "By the gods, Percy, why are you sorry? Show me that again!"

I didn't want to. The short burst of manic energy had completely abandoned me. But Luke insisted.
"Of course he did." Thalia said bitterly.

"What do you mean?" Hera peered down at her confused but warmly.

Flustered that Hera was being nice to her, Thalia just mutely shook her head.

This time, there was no contest. The moment our swords connected, Luke hit my hilt and sent my weapon skidding across the floor.

After a long pause, somebody in the audience said, "Beginner's luck?"

"No, the damn water." Ares said, his face contorting into a scowl.

Luke wiped the sweat off his brow. He appraised at me with an entirely new interest. "Maybe," he said. "But I wonder what Percy could do with a balanced sword... ."

Jason sighed. "I get the feeling this Luke isn't quite like Luke Skywalker, huh?"

Percy laughed. "No, not quite. Though should be obvious. His father isn't exactly Vader either?"

"What are you talking about?" Athena asked annoyed she didn't know as to what they were referencing.

"Pop culture." Thalia told her, rolling her eyes.

Friday afternoon, I was sitting with Grover at the lake, resting from a near-death experience on the climbing wall. Grover had scampered to the top like a mountain goat, but the lava had almost gotten me. My shirt had smoking holes in it. The hairs had been singed off my forearms.

We sat on the pier, watching the naiads do underwater basket-weaving, until I got up the nerve to ask Grover how his conversation had gone with Mr. D.

His face turned a sickly shade of yellow.

"Sickly shade of yellow?" Hermes yelped. He stared at Dionysus indignantly, "What have you been doing to that poor satyr?!"

"I don't know. Future remember?" Dionysus grit out, irritation flooding his body. Beside him, his wife laughed softly at his misery.

"Fine," he said. "Just great."

"So your career's still on track?"

He glanced at me nervously. "Chiron t-told you I want a searcher's license?"

"Searcher's license? Searching for what?" Apollo asked curiously.

"There's...this thing." Percy explained vaguely, waving an arm here and there.

"Well... no." I had no idea what a searcher's license was, but it didn't seem like the right time to ask.

"You have tact?" Thalia blurted out.
He glared at her. "Yes, Thalia. I do."

"He just said you had big plans, you know ... and that you needed credit for completing a keeper's assignment. So did you get it?"

Grover looked down at the naiads. "Mr. D suspended judgment. He said I hadn't failed or succeeded with you yet, so our fates were still tied together. If you got a quest and I went along to protect you, and we both came back alive, then maybe he'd consider the job complete."

"That doesn't sound too bad." Artemis conceded, looking at her half-brother. He shrugged at her, taking a sip from the glass of wine that had appeared in his hand.

My spirits lifted. "Well, that's not so bad, right?"

"Blaa-ha-ha! He might as well have transferred me to stable-cleaning duty. The chances of you getting a quest... and even if you did, why would you want me along?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Nico and Thalia said simultaneously. They both looked at Percy a little accusatorily.

"Hey, I don't know okay? He was sort of in a self-pity thing then." The two nodded. They had seen Grover in a funk like that themselves.

"Of course I'd want you along!"

Grover stared glumly into the water. "Basket-weaving ... Must be nice to have a useful skill."

"I hate it when he gets like that." Thalia sighed.

"Me too." Percy agreed.

I tried to reassure him that he had lots of talents, but that just made him look more miserable. We talked about canoeing and swordplay for a while, then debated the pros and cons of the different gods. Finally, I asked him about the four empty cabins.

"They're haunted. Don't you know?" Jason joked quietly to Percy, causing him to laugh out loud.

Nico rolled his eyes at the pair. He didn't like Jason, for some reason he made him feel uneasy.

"Number eight, the silver one, belongs to Artemis," he said. "She vowed to be a maiden forever. So of course, no kids. The cabin is, you know, honorary. If she didn't have one, she'd be mad."

"I would not be mad!" Artemis protested indignantly. Apollo stared at her. "So it's okay, if they take your cabin down?"

"No! I mean, the cabin is for my Hunters when they must remain at camp."

"Uh huh," came Apollo's disbelieving voice.

"Yeah, okay. But the other three, the ones at the end. Are those the Big Three?"

"Ha." Hades scoffed. "My dear brother Zeus, would never allow such a thing." He gave the King of the Gods, a bitter look.
Zeus inwardly flinched.

Grover tensed. We were getting close to a touchy subject. "No. One of them, number two, is Hera's," he said. "That's another honorary thing.

"Yes, everyone gets honor. But me." Hades put in scathingly. 'Or our sister." He added.

"Brother." Hestia warned.

"No Hestia. You gave up your place for another one of his children. He treats us like dirt, why should we let the others remain ignorant to what he's done?"

"To keep the peace." She told him, causing the fight to drain out of him.

She's the goddess of marriage, so of course she wouldn't go around having affairs with mortals. That's her husband's job.

"Not his job, his duty. He hardly knows anything else." Hera threw in her own bitter thoughts. Zeus growled, but it had no effect on either his wife or brother.

When we say the Big Three, we mean the three powerful brothers, the sons of Kronos.'

"Zeus, Poseidon, Hades."

"At least the boy acknowledges me." Hades grumbled.

"Right. You know. After the great battle with the Titans, they took over the world from their dad and drew lots to decide who got what."

"Zeus got the sky," I remembered. "Poseidon the sea, Hades the Underworld."

"Uh-huh."

"But Hades doesn't have a cabin here."

"Gee, I wonder why." Hades bit out.

"Lord Hades, with all due respect may I say something?" Percy broke into Hades' anger fest. He ignored the looks of awe he was receiving from Thalia and Nico for being respectful to a god. He blamed Terminus, personally. That god had a way of changing a person's attitude.

"What boy?"

"You will get a cabin in the future, so there's no point in getting angry about it now."

"If I get angry, perhaps my idiot brother will realize his mistake sooner." Came the counter argument. Unable to find a proper response, Percy shrugged and left the lord of the dead alone in his mutterings.

"No. He doesn't have a throne on Olympus, either. He sort of does his own thing down in the Underworld. If he did have a cabin here ..." Grover shuddered. "Well, it wouldn't be pleasant. Let's leave it at that."

Hades' eyes darkened with anger.
"He had an...issue with you due to a past experience. He meant no disrespect." Nico quickly covered for Grover.

Hades sighed and after a few moments nodded with understanding.

"But Zeus and Poseidon—they both had, like, a bazillion kids in the myths. Why are their cabins empty?"

"Question of the century." Everyone was intrigued now. This was the biggest mystery of them all, what could cause Poseidon and Zeus to stop having demigod children?

Grover shifted his hooves uncomfortably. "About sixty years ago, after World War II, the Big Three agreed they wouldn't sire any more heroes. Their children were just too powerful. They were affecting the course of human events too much, causing too much carnage. World War II, you know, that was basically a fight between the sons of Zeus and Poseidon on one side, and the sons of Hades on the other. The winning side, Zeus and Poseidon, made Hades swear an oath with them: no more affairs with mortal women. They all swore on the River Styx."

Artemis raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "A war, made those two stop having children?"

Hades leaned back in his throne, annoyed. "Of course you force me into it. Despite my not even having too many children." Persephone held onto his arm, and whispered into his ear, "Forget them milord." She smiled at him flirtatiously glad he wasn't upset that he wouldn't get the chance to fool around with mortal women. His anger dissipated instantly.

Amphitrite and Hera exchanged uncomfortable glances. Neither of them enjoyed watching their husbands with other women, but they both knew it had to be much more serious than a war to stop them.

"That war killed billions of people." Jason pointed out. "And before anyone asks, I have no idea about any of this, alright? So don't ask."

The gods grudgingly agreed.

The future Greek trio looked at Jason slightly impressed. "We'll make a Greek out of you yet." Percy grinned, confusing both Nico and Thalia with his words.

Thunder boomed...

I said, "That's the most serious oath you can make."

"You knew?" Athena couldn't help but throw in scornfully.

Percy stared at her coolly, not caring to answer her.

Grover nodded.

"And the brothers kept their word—no kids?"

"War or no war, I bet Zeus was the one who broke the oath first." Apollo declared.

"I wouldn't!" Zeus protested.

"50 drachma you did?"
"Deal!"

Thalia sighed. It was nice not having Hera hate her. But time was up.

Grover's face darkened. "Seventeen years ago, Zeus fell off the wagon."

"HA!" As Zeus paid Apollo dejectedly, Hera scowled darkly at her husband.

There was this TV starlet with a big fluffy eighties hairdo—he just couldn't help himself.

"Of course he couldn't." She said to the room scathingly.

When their child was born, a little girl named Thalia...

A shimmering silvery blue lightning bolt appeared above Thalia. She stood up and gave a mocking bow as she introduced herself.

"Thalia, Daughter of Zeus."

The gods and past heroes stared at her in shock. Of all the gods who could've been her parent, they hadn't thought of Zeus. Staring at her electric blue eyes, it was obvious that her father truly was Zeus.

The lord of the sky observed his own daughter. If she were his only child in the future... well, the River Styx is serious about promises. Zeus himself got off easy because he's immortal, but he brought a terrible fate on his daughter."

"But that isn't fair.' It wasn't the little girl's fault.'"

"It never is." Thalia said bitterly, seeing as everyone who had started to accept her was acting as if she were some sort of anomaly. She hated that stupid prophecy.

Percy put an arm around her pulling her into a hug. She allowed it, knowing he understood how she felt.

Grover hesitated. "Percy, children of the Big Three have powers greater than other half-bloods."

"Thank you." The children of the Big Three called out simultaneously and then grinned at each other. Nico had to bite his tongue to stop himself from doing the same. He glanced over at Jason and noticed him clenching his fist. Nico's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

They have a strong aura, a scent that attracts monsters. When Hades found out about the girl, he wasn't too happy about Zeus breaking his oath. Hades let the worst monsters out of Tartarus to torment Thalia.

"I did? Why would I care...oh right." Hades began bemused before remembering that he had been forced into the oath that Zeus had broken.

Nico glanced at his father. He thought it was because that he had been forced into following something Zeus himself broke first. It was so much more than that.

A satyr was assigned to be her keeper when she was twelve, but there was nothing he could do. He tried to escort her here with a couple of other half-bloods she'd befriended. They
almost made it. They got all the way to the top of that hill."

He pointed across the valley, to the pine tree where I'd fought the minotaur. "All three Kindly Ones were after them,

Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone very pointed avoided looking at Thalia. They knew that they had been the ones to kill her.

along with a horde of hellhounds. They were about to be overrun when Thalia told her satyr to take the other two half-bloods to safety while she held off the monsters. She was wounded and tired, and she didn't want to live like a hunted animal. The satyr didn't want to leave her, but he couldn't change her mind, and he had to protect the others. So Thalia made her final stand alone, at the top of that hill. As she died, Zeus took pity on her. He turned her into that pine tree. Her spirit still helps protect the borders of the valley. That's why the hill is called Half-Blood Hill."

Everyone in the room was stunned. Thalia buried her face into Percy's shoulder to avoid their stares. Finally Persephone broke the silence.

"If you're dead, how are you here? Alive?"

"Its a long story. If we keep reading you'll probably find out." Percy answered for her, rubbing Thalia's should to offer her, his support.

I stared at the pine in the distance.

The story made me feel hollow, and guilty too. A girl my age had sacrificed herself to save her friends. She had faced a whole army of monsters. Next to that, my victory over the Minotaur didn't seem like much. I wondered, if I'd acted differently, could I have saved my mother?

"No!" Thalia stared at Percy. "No. You can't die. You hear me Jackson?"

"This was forever ago." He began before she cut him off.

"No. I know you. You'd do the same thing for anyone. And trust me not everyone gets turned into a tree and then gets saved. So promise me. No trying to die for other people."

"Promise."

Jason subtly coughed, gazing at Percy questioningly at his words. The boy tilted his head, a tiny imperceptible nod. Jason felt a flood of relief wash over him. Thank god, it would be over.

"Grover," I said, "have heroes really gone on quests to the Underworld?"

Hades and his Furies groaned.

"Not another one." Megaera sighed.

"Not again." Alecto corrected, remembering the boy had already killed her once.


Hades' eyes narrowed. "Houdini? Don't heroes get tired of annoying me."
Persephone patted her husband's shoulder comfortingly. She knew that all these heroes asking for their loved ones back hurt her lord. He couldn't bring people back to life. It wasn't possible.

"And have they ever returned somebody from the dead?"

"No. Never. Orpheus came close... . Percy, you're not seriously thinking—"

"No,"

"Yes." The room groused collectively.

Percy shrugged. "It was my mother, of course I would."

I lied. "I was just wondering. So ... a satyr is always assigned to guard a demigod?"

"You are terrible at changing the subject." Jason told Percy seriously.

"C'mon. I was twelve."

"No excuse. I was better at seven."

"Yeah? And you were training as a demigod since you were three. You don't count."

Thalia smiled slowly seeing Percy and her brother interact as friends. She was glad they got along, unlike her and Percy at first. Beside her, Nico wasn't as happy..

Grover studied me warily. I hadn't persuaded him that I'd really dropped the Underworld idea. "Not always. We go undercover to a lot of schools. We try to sniff out the half-bloods who have the makings of great heroes. If we find one with a very strong aura, like a child of the Big Three, we alert Chiron. He tries to keep an eye on them, since they could cause really huge problems."

"And you found me. Chiron said you thought I might be something special."

"The whole camp thinks you're special. So annoying." Jason told Percy, not realizing Thalia and Nico were listening in.

"Yeah? Right back at you. Always Jason Grace this. Jason Grace that."

"Guess you haven't heard the rants we all hear about Percy Jackson. Chiron most of all, adores you."

The two laughed, it was nice to know that the places they considered home cared about them so much.

Nico looked at Thalia both surprised that Jason was so quick to make such a good impression at camp.

Grover looked as if I'd just led him into a trap. "I didn't... Oh, listen, don't think like that. If you were—you know—you'd never ever be allowed a quest, and I'd never get my license."

Thalia finally laughed. "Glad he has his priorities straight." Gods, she loved Grover. The satyr was one of her best friends.

You're probably a child of Hermes. Or maybe even one of the minor gods, like Nemesis, the god of revenge.
"Nemesis is a goddess." Amphitrite stated dryly.

"We know." Percy answered thinking about Ethan Nakamura.

Don't worry, okay?"

I got the idea he was reassuring himself more than me.

"Probably." Nico agreed. "Lucky for him you were a bigshot."

"Hey!" Percy mock-protested a boyish grin on his face, his sea-green eyes crinkling in amusement. Nico felt his stomach lurch as he smiled back softly.

That night after dinner, there was a lot more excitement than usual.

At last, it was time for capture the flag.

"Your first capture the flag. Does it go as terrible as ours did the last time we were at camp together?" She looked at Percy and Nico. "All of us, I mean."

"Ha. No. You'll see." Percy rolled his eyes at her.

"Question. What is capture the flag?" Orion asked curiously.

"Its sort of a training exercise," Jason answered. The others nodded in agreement to his explanation.

When the plates were cleared away, the conch horn sounded and we all stood at our tables.

Campers yelled and cheered as Annabeth and two of her siblings ran into the pavilion carrying a silk banner. It was about ten feet long, glistening gray, with a painting of a barn owl above an olive tree. From the opposite side of the pavilion, Clarisse and her buddies ran in with another banner, of identical size, but gaudy red, painted with a bloody spear and a boar's head.

"Ares and Athena. Going against each other. Again. What a surprise." Zeus sighed wearily. Those two were the most headstrong of his children always going at each other. He was just glad they hadn't destroyed anything important amidst their fighting.

I turned to Luke and yelled over the noise, "Those are the flags?"

"Yeah."

"Ares and Athena always lead the teams?"

"Not always," he said. "But often."

"Often, translating into every ten out of nine times, its Ares vs Athena." Percy confirmed.

"So, if another cabin captures one, what do you do— repaint the flag?"

"Paint?" Thalia laughed out loud.

"Shut up. I was still new to the whole demigod thing you know."

He grinned. "You'll see. First we have to get one."
"Whose side are we on?"

He gave me a sly look, as if he knew something I didn't. The scar on his face made him look almost evil in the torchlight.

"Not almost. And definitely not just look." Thalia muttered angrily in Percy's ear.

"We've made a temporary alliance with Athena. Tonight, we get the flag from Ares. And you are going to help."


"Good?" Orion asked him unsurely. "I mean you're still alive so...?" He trailed off. Percy simply motioned towards the book.

The teams were announced. Athena had made an alliance with Apollo and Hermes, the two biggest cabins.

"How surprising." Artemis said scathingly at her brother and half-brother.

"Hey!" Hermes objected angrily. "They aren't even all my kids! I don't have time to have that many children."

Artemis looked abashed. "Yes, you're right. I apologize Hermes."

Apparently, privileges had been traded—shower times, chore schedules, the best slots for activities—in order to win support.

Ares had allied themselves with everybody else: Dionysus, Demeter, Aphrodite, and Hephaestus. From what I'd seen, Dionysus's kids were actually good athletes, but there were only two of them. Demeter's kids had the edge with nature skills and outdoor stuff but they weren't very aggressive. Aphrodite's sons and daughters I wasn't too worried about. They mostly sat out every activity and checked their reflections in the lake and did their hair and gossiped. Hephaestus's kids weren't pretty, and there were only four of them, but they were big and burly from working in the metal shop all day. They might be a problem. That, of course, left Ares's cabin: a dozen of the biggest, ugliest, meanest kids on Long Island, or anywhere else on the planet.

Chiron hammered his hoof on the marble.

"Ouch? I mean stomping on marble hurts at times, and he has to do it loud enough so bloodthirsty demigods can hear him...and no? Just me? Okay." Jason said.

"You tried." Percy laughed at him mirthfully, but his body was full of tension as if he expected to get in a fight. As far as Jason remembered, the Percy he knew wasn't like that. What had happened in such a short time?

"Heroes!" he announced. "You know the rules. The creek is the boundary line. The entire forest is fair game. All magic items are allowed. The banner must be prominently displayed, and have no more than two guards. Prisoners may be disarmed, but may not be bound or gagged. No killing or maiming is allowed. I will serve as referee and battlefield medic. Arm yourselves!"
He spread his hands, and the tables were suddenly covered with equipment: helmets, bronze swords, spears, oxhide shields coated in metal.

"Whoa," I said. "We're really supposed to use these?"

"No. We use the ones made out of rubber."

"Shut up."

Luke looked at me as if I were crazy. "Unless you want to get skewered by your friends in cabin five. Here—Chiron thought these would fit. You'll be on border patrol."

My shield was the size of an NBA backboard, with a big caduceus in the middle. It weighed about a million pounds. I could have snowboarded on it fine, but I hoped nobody seriously expected me to run fast. My helmet, like all the helmets on Athena's side, had a blue horsehair plume on top. Ares and their allies had red plumes.

Nico and Thalia both looked at Percy, then at each other and promptly burst out laughing.

"I wouldn't laugh Di Angelo. Your first game will probably be in these books too." Percy growled. Nico shut up.

Annabeth yelled, "Blue team, forward!"

We cheered and shook our swords and followed her down the path to the south woods. The red team yelled taunts at us as they headed off toward the north.

"Any good insults?" Theseus asked curiously.

Percy looked at him incredulously, "I was twelve. This was like five years ago. Why would I remember those insults?" Theseus did not respond.

I managed to catch up with Annabeth without tripping over my equipment. "Hey."

She kept marching.

"So what's the plan?" I asked. "Got any magic items you can loan me?"

Her hand drifted toward her pocket, as if she were afraid I'd stolen something.

"She didn't even act like that towards Luke. And he's a son of Hermes." Thalia said her face settling into surprise and mild anger as to how Annabeth was treating Percy.

"Just watch Clarisse's spear," she said. "You don't want that thing touching you."

"That sounds so wrong." Hercules said a twinkle in his eyes.

A majority of the room looked at him in disgust. The shameless gods like Ares, Aphrodite and Zeus privately agreed with him.

Otherwise, don't worry. We'll take the banner from Ares. Has Luke given you your job?"

"Border patrol, whatever that means."
"It's easy. Stand by the creek, keep the reds away.

"Creek?" Ares groaned.

"Its not like she knew." Hephaestus told him, laughing at his expression.

Leave the rest to me. Athena always has a plan."

Athena nodded approvingly at her future daughter.

She pushed ahead, leaving me in the dust.

"Okay," I mumbled. "Glad you wanted me on your team."

"Ouch. That was a little rude." Ariadne looked at Percy sympathetically, ignoring her husband's look of surprise.

It was a warm, sticky night. The woods were dark, with fireflies popping in and out of view. Annabeth stationed me next to a little creek that gurgled over some rocks, then she and the rest of the team scattered into the trees.

"Wait she left you, someone new to this whole thing and mostly untrained, to defend an area alone?" Jason asked startled. Percy was unable to come up with a reason that justified Annabeth's thoughts.

"And this is your daughter. Typical, getting others killed." Triton sneered at Athena. The goddess angrily glared at him. She hated that everyone kept pointing out her flaws. Who were they to do such a thing?

Standing there alone, with my big blue-feathered helmet and my huge shield, I felt like an idiot. The bronze sword, like all the swords I'd tried so far, seemed balanced wrong. The leather grip pulled on my hand like a bowling ball.

"What sword do you use now then?" Poseidon asked curiously. An untrained demigod hadn't been able to figure out which sword was balanced properly or not since...ever. That meant Percy was extremely powerful and capable.

"Anaklusmos."

Zoë looked up at Percy sharply. That sword...he had it. She snuck a peek at Hercules who was staring at Percy speculatively.

There was no way anybody would actually attack me, would they? I mean, Olympus had to have liability issues, right?

There was an uproar at that. "You wish kid." Ares snickered.

"I do." Percy agreed wholeheartedly. After all the quests he's had to go on, he thought he deserved it too.

Far away, the conch horn blew. I heard whoops and yells in the woods, the clanking of metal, kids fighting. A blue-plumed ally from Apollo raced past me like a deer, leaped through the creek, and disappeared into enemy territory.

Great, I thought. I'll miss all the fun, as usual.
Percy sighed wistfully, "Why did I ever want to be part of the 'fun'?"

Thalia laughed, "Because Kelp Head, you're an idiot."

"Shut up, Pinecone Face."

Then I heard a sound that sent a chill up my spine, a low canine growl, somewhere close by.

Percy stiffened. He remembered exactly why he felt that way.

I raised my shield instinctively; I had the feeling something was stalking me.

"Self-centered much?" Jason joked. Percy rolled his eyes at him.

Then the growling stopped. I felt the presence retreating.

On the other side of the creek, the underbrush exploded. Five Ares warriors came yelling and screaming out of the dark.

"Wait what? You felt the presence retreat, and then you got ambushed? What was stalking you exactly then?" Orion asked confused.

"You'll see."

"Cream the punk!" Clarisse screamed.

Her ugly pig eyes glared through the slits of her helmet.

Ares looked at Percy with cool eyes. Percy shrugged, "Long time ago." He reminded Ares. "We're sort of friends now."

"Sort of." Thalia whispered beside him. He gave her an exasperated look.

She brandished a five-foot-long spear, its barbed metal tip flickering with red light. Her siblings had only the standard-issue bronze swords—not that that made me feel any better.

They charged across the stream. There was no help in sight. I could run. Or I could defend myself against half the Ares cabin.

"So you ran." Ares surmised.

Percy smirked, and shook his head.

I managed to sidestep the first kid's swing, but these guys were not as stupid the Minotaur.

"Of course not. They are my future kids." Ares bragged. Then frowned.

"What are they thinking? That sort of fight has no honor." He murmured to himself. Aphrodite overhearing him, beamed at him. She knew he was a good person. Deep down.

They surrounded me, and Clarisse thrust at me with her spear. My shield deflected the point, but I felt a painful tingling all over my body. My hair stood on end. My shield arm went numb, and the air burned.

Electricity. Her stupid spear was electric.
"I like her choice. Blasting you with electricity is always fun." Thalia declared.

Percy growled. "No, its not."

Nico nodded. "I agree. Being hit with lightning sucks." The son of Hades and the son of Poseidon looked at each other and simultaneously winced, remembering all of the times when Thalia had blasted them with lightning.

Thalia laughed. Jason felt a little left out though. He would've made a joke but he couldn't since the Fates had ordered him to keep quiet about his parentage.

_ I fell back._

_Another Ares guy slammed me in the chest with the butt of his sword and I hit the dirt._

_They could've kicked me into jelly, but they were too busy laughing._

"Give him a haircut," Clarisse said. "Grab his hair."

"No." The future demigods all protested. "Percy's hair is trademark."

Percy stared at them. "What."

"You know! Like Clark Kent and the S, or Luke Skywalker and his blue saber."

"Doesn't Supergirl also have that S?"

"Yeah, well I'm pretty sure Harry Potter has your hair. Exceptions."

Percy gave up. He would never understand any of them.

_I managed to get to my feet. I raised my sword, but Clarisse slammed it aside with her spear as sparks flew. Now both my arms felt numb._

"Oh, wow," Clarisse said. "I'm scared of this guy. Really scared."

"Her sarcasm is terrible." Percy shook his head disappointedly.

"Oh right! Speaking of sarcasm, did you know that the Stoll brothers have named you the King of Sarcasm?"

"Don't remind me." Percy groaned.

"The flag is that way," I told her. I wanted to sound angry, but I was afraid it didn't come out that way.

"Probably didn't." Perseus said dryly.

Percy shrugged at his namesake.

"Yeah," one of her siblings said. "But see, we don't care about the flag. We care about a guy who made our cabin look stupid."

"You do that without my help," I told them. It probably wasn't the smartest thing to say.
"You think?" Theseus looked at his half-brother incredulously. "I actually think your exploits are going to be the death of me, rather than all the monsters that want to kill me."

"Sorry."

Two of them came at me. I backed up toward the creek, tried to raise my shield, but Clarisse was too fast. Her spear stuck me straight in the ribs. If I hadn't been wearing an armored breastplate, I would've been shish-ke-babeted. As it was, the electric point just about shocked my teeth out of my mouth. One of her cabinmates slashed his sword across my arm, leaving a good-size cut.

Seeing my own blood made me dizzy—warm and cold at the same time.

"No maiming," I managed to say.

"Oops," the guy said. "Guess I lost my dessert privilege.

"Are you serious? Maiming only causes you to lose your desserts? What the actual Hades?" Jason said in shock.

Hades glared furiously at the boy, though it went ignored.

"Seriously?" Jason demanded.

The Greeks looked at each other and answered collectively. "Yes."

"You know that..." Jason looked at Percy. He nodded. "And it wouldn't be dessert privileges..."

"Yeah."

"This is unbelievable."

"Sorry dude."

The others looked in between Percy and Jason. Nico frowned, how well did the two know each other that Percy knew exactly what Jason was trying to say. He looked at Thalia who had the same thoughtful expression on her face.

He pushed me into the creek and I landed with a splash. They all laughed. I figured as soon as they were through being amused, I would die. But then something happened. The water seemed to wake up my senses, as if I'd just had a bag of my mom's double-espresso jelly beans.

"Oh no." Ares moaned. "They're dead."

Ignoring Ares, the future Greek trio sighed blissfully. "Those are good jellybeans." Nico said wistfully. Thalia and Percy agreed wholeheartedly.

Apollo looked at them. "I want some of those jellybeans!"

"Sure? But they're invented in the future so..." Realizing it was impossible for him to have any jellybeans, his entire face fell. Immediately they all felt bad for him. Artemis rolled her eyes when she saw the expression on the demigods' face. "Ignore him." She advised. "It'll pass."

Not being able to do much else, they heeded her words.
Clarisse and her cabinmates came into the creek to get me, but I stood to meet them. I knew what to do. I swung the flat of my sword against the first guy's head and knocked his helmet clean off. I hit him so hard I could see his eyes vibrating as he crumpled into the water.

Amphitrite, Poseidon and Triton all exchanged looks. Orion and Theseus did the same. The water did reenergize him, but to become that good of a fighter? The boy was something else.

Zoë paused in her reading, thinking the same thing. She subtly looked at him, a boy had not puzzled her in such a way since Hercules. Then she swore off men for eternity, why was Percy Jackson so different?

Ugly Number Two and Ugly Number Three came at me. I slammed one in the face with my shield and used my sword to shear off the other guy's horsehair plume. Both of them backed up quick. Ugly Number Four didn't look really anxious to attack, but Clarisse kept coming, the point of her spear crackling with energy. As soon as she thrust, I caught the shaft between the edge of my shield and my sword, and I snapped it like a twig.

"You broke her electric spear? But she still used it in...you know what?" Nico asked bemused.

"She had a spare. Maimer or better known as Lamer." Percy explained, raising an eyebrow at how Nico referenced to the Titan War. Nico shrugged a light pink coating his cheeks.

"Ah!" she screamed. "You idiot! You corpse-breath worm!"

"Nah, Percy's breath is more like plankton. Or fish. Yuck." Thalia teased.

"Very funny." He told her sarcastically.

She probably would've said worse, but I smacked her between the eyes with my sword-butt and sent her stumbling backward out of the creek.

Then I heard yelling, elated screams, and I saw Luke racing toward the boundary line with the red team's banner lifted high. He was flanked by a couple of Hermes guys covering his retreat, and a few Apollos behind them, fighting off the Hephaestus kids. The Ares folks got up, and Clarisse muttered a dazed curse.

"A trick!" she shouted. "It was a trick."

"It always is." Athena said proudly breaking her silence. Annabeth was truly her daughter.

Everyone else stifled a groan. It had been so nice when she had remained quiet. The gods all silently prayed they wouldn't have to suffer a millennium hearing about Athena brag about her future daughter.

They staggered after Luke, but it was too late. Everybody converged on the creek as Luke ran across into friendly territory. Our side exploded into cheers. The red banner shimmered and turned to silver. The boar and spear were replaced with a huge caduceus, the symbol of cabin eleven. Everybody on the blue team picked up Luke and started carrying him around on their shoulders. Chiron cantered out from the woods and blew the conch horn.

Hermes gave a hoot. "My son did it! What were you saying Athena?"

The goddess scowled at him.
The game was over. We'd won.

I was about to join the celebration when Annabeth's voice, right next to me in the creek, said, "Not bad, hero."

The laughter in the room dissipated. "She had been there?! And she didn't bother to help you?" Triton spat.

Percy opened his mouth, then closed it. "She had a plan," he said weakly.

Triton scowled darkly, "Like mother, like daughter." He stared at Athena in disgust.

I looked, but she wasn't there.

"Where the heck did you learn to fight like that?" she asked. The air shimmered, and she materialized, holding a Yankees baseball cap as if she'd just taken it off her head.

I felt myself getting angry. I wasn't even fazed by the fact that she'd just been invisible. "You set me up," I said. "You put me here because you knew Clarisse would come after me, while you sent Luke around the flank. You had it all figured out."

Annabeth shrugged. "I told you. Athena always, always has a plan."

Jason watched everyone in the room become furious. As confused as he was about Annabeth, he couldn't help but whisper to Percy, "People don't like Athena much huh?" The raven-haired boy shook his head in agreement.

"Triton's worry would be nice, if I didn't know that it was because he hates Athena. He doesn't even remotely likes me," he whispered back.

"Most of my godly siblings hate me too, guess its a norm of being a demigod." "Uh huh."

"A plan to get me pulverized."

"I came as fast as I could. I was about to jump in, but ..." She shrugged. "You didn't need help."

Then she noticed my wounded arm. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?" Perseus asked angry at the daughter of Athena's attitude himself.

"Sword cut," I said. "What do you think?"

"No. It was a sword cut. Look at it."

The blood was gone. Where the huge cut had been, there was a long white scratch, and even that was fading. As I watched, it turned into a small scar, and disappeared.

"You're strong." Poseidon told him. "Most of my children take years to have any sort of mastery over the water."

Percy blinked in surprise. "Um thanks?" Poseidon shook his head fondly and then stopped catching himself. What was he doing? Getting attached to a son not even born yet. was just asking for trouble.
"I—I don't get it," I said.

Annabeth was thinking hard. I could almost see the gears turning. She looked down at my feet, then at Clarisse's broken spear, and said, "Step out of the water, Percy."

"What—"

"Just do it."

I came out of the creek and immediately felt bone tired. My arms started to go numb again. My adrenaline rush left me. I almost fell over, but Annabeth steadied me.

"Oh, Styx," she cursed. "This is not good. I didn't want ... I assumed it would be Zeus..."

"Hey!" The Lord of the Sky thundered angrily.

"You did this to yourself." Hera told him unsympathetically.

"What does that mean? Not good? Who cares what she wants?" Poseidon exclaimed growling at Athena. Amphitrite stroked his arm, it seemed that the goddess of wisdom had made it her goal to become an enemy of the sea. Athena kept quiet not being able to say anything in her defense.

After I could ask what she meant, I heard that canine growl again, but much closer than before. A howl ripped through the forest.

The campers' cheering died instantly. Chiron shouted something in Ancient Greek, which I would realize, only later, I had understood perfectly: "Stand ready! My bow!"

Annabeth drew her sword.

There on the rocks just above us was a black hound the size of a rhino, with lava-red eyes and fangs like daggers.

"A hellhound." Orion stated needlessly looking at his half-brother worriedly.

It was looking straight at me.

"Why?" Theseus groaned. He looked like he was going to have a heart attack.

"Um its okay. This was years ago." Percy tried to comfort them.

"Not helping!" They both snapped.

Percy shut up. It was a new experience for him having someone who wasn't his mother or had been his friend for years caring about him like that. It was...interesting.

Nobody moved except Annabeth, who yelled, "Percy, run!"

She tried to step in front of me, but the hound was too fast. It leaped over her—an enormous shadow with teeth—and just as it hit me, as I stumbled backward and felt its razor-sharp claws ripping through my armor, there was a cascade of thwacking sounds, like forty pieces of paper being ripped one after the other. From the hounds neck sprouted a cluster of arrows. The monster fell dead at my feet.
The two breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank gods for Chiron." Theseus spoke.

"Agreed." Orion said shaking his head. "Wanna give us a heads up? How often do these experiences happen to you?"

Percy shrugged. "A lot? I don't know. Anyway aren't you two demigods? Shouldn't you be used to this?"

"Yeah for us," Orion agreed.

"Not for others." Theseus put in. The pair didn't know why either. They just knew they suddenly cared a lot about Percy now.

Artemis looked at Orion warmly. She had known that he was a good guy. Looking at her Apollo repressed the urge to groan. He really didn't like Orion, making his sister think about guys. Hades no.

By some miracle, I was still alive. I didn't want to look underneath the ruins of my shredded armor. My chest felt warm and wet, and I knew I was badly cut. Another second, and the monster would've turned me into a hundred pounds of delicate meat.

Chiron trotted up next to us, a bow in his hand, his face grim.

"Di immortales!" Annabeth said. "That's a hellhound from the Fields of Punishment. They don't ... they're not supposed to ..."

"Someone summoned it," Chiron said. "Someone inside the camp."


"Yeah, the first attempt. How special." Percy rolled his eyes.

"Wait what?" Jason asked confused.

Percy smirked. "You'll see."

"This why you're so famous at camp?" Percy shrugged in response.

Clarisse yelled, "It's all Percy's fault! Percy summoned it!"

"Be quiet, child," Chiron told her.

"What? Is she insane?" Hercules asked bewilderedly.

"We've had our doubts." Thalia revealed.

We watched the body of the hellhound melt into shadow, soaking into the ground until it disappeared.

"You're wounded," Annabeth told me. "Quick, Percy, get in the water."

"I'm okay."

"No, you're not," she said. "Chiron, watch this."
Oh finally! The big reveal!” Aphrodite exclaimed happily.

"Fun." Percy said wryly. The other future demigods looked at him sympathetically. Especially Jason. His claiming was just as dramatic as Percy's. Thalia and Nico could only cringe thankful they hadn't had a conventional claiming.

I was too tired to argue. I stepped back into the creek, the whole camp gathering around me.

Instantly, I felt better. I could feel the cuts on my chest closing up. Some of the campers gasped.

"Look, I—I don't know why," I said, trying to apologize. "I'm sorry..."

"You apologize a lot. That can't be healthy. For your mental state I mean." Tisiphone told Percy in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Do I?" The boy asked cryptically.

"Yes." Alecto answered bluntly. His friends were startled, they had never noticed there was anything wrong with Percy.

But they weren't watching my wounds heal. They were staring at something above my head.

"Percy," Annabeth said, pointing. "Um ..."

By the time I looked up, the sign was already fading, but I could still make out the hologram of green light, spinning and gleaming. A three-tipped spear: a trident.

"Your father," Annabeth murmured. "This is really not good."

"I will remember this Athena." Poseidon said softly his voice dangerously low. Athena's face remained impassive, though she grew worried for the safety of her children.

"It is determined," Chiron announced.

All around me, campers started kneeling, even the Ares cabin, though they didn't look happy about it.

There were light chuckles at this, though the tension in the room remained thick.

"My father?" I asked, completely bewildered.


"Done." Zoë snapped the book shut.

"I'll read." Megaera offered. She loved watching the gods get angry at each other.

"No." Hera countered. "We need a breather and there is a lot to discuss. A break first." The others followed her lead as she walked out of the throne room into a grand hallway. "Do what you want and be back within the hour." She glanced at her husband. "You and I need to talk." Zeus nodded. There were evidently many problems in the future that they needed to solve. The two walked into one of Zeus' nearby shrines leaving the rest of them to figure out what they wanted to do.
Hestia took charge. "You all heard Hera. Go on. And be back in an hour." Slowly but surely they all dispersed needing time to process everything they had learned.

Wow guys, listen I am so sorry. I did not mean to go for so long without updating. Life just got in the way. So sorry. I will be updating more soon, so hope that makes up for it! Also Happy New Year everyone. Enjoy 2018 and forget the nightmare which was 2017.

Okay so Percy is from the Blood of Olympus but his attitude is actually more from the Trials of Apollo though, so hope that's okay. If I'm looking at the timeline clearly its only been a span of six months in which Percy has been stressed over school. Just his general behavior though, his experiences and emotions are all BoO.

There will be a switch between Thalia and Nico soon, so they're from the same timeline. I just want them to have a little time with this version of Percy before their more understanding counterparts take their place. Enjoy their confusion while it lasts!

That's it from me, so review and I seriously will update some time next week.
As they all trailed out of the throne room the gods silently argued amongst each other. Percy and Jason exchanged glances, a knowing smirk on Percy's face. "How exactly do we defeat you-know-who?"


"Just because you've already done it doesn't mean it's funny."

"What's funny?" Thalia broke in curiously. The two exchanged another look before simultaneously shaking their heads.

"Nothing," the two chorused. Nico looked at them suspiciously. He and Thalia gave each other disbelieving looks. Thalia shook her head.

"Fine. Answer this. How do you know my brother, Percy?"

"Your brother?" Nico asked startled. The punk girl nodded, not giving any details.

Percy hesitated, "It's… a long story."

"We have time."

"It'll probably be in the books though." Jason broke in. "Speaking of, what's with Annabeth not liking you?" He asked, effectively changing the subject. Thalia and Nico glared at him for it, but both let the matter drop.

"It just took us awhile to know and get to like each other. I mean, we were twelve." Percy shrugged.

"And Luke?" Jason asked.

"Long story. You'll see. We aren't allowed to spoil anything right?" Thalia said cheekily throwing his own words back at him.

Jason shot his sister an unimpressed look, which she shook off looking extremely smug.

"Exactly. So what's happened since I was gone?"

The trio filled him in quickly, and how the gods' attitudes was either worsening or becoming slightly better. Which was which they still weren't sure.

After listening carefully, Percy nodded seriously. "I see. I wonder why."

No one had an answer for him.

"Hey Percy." A voice called. The four turned collectively to see Theseus waving at them.

"Theseus? What are you doing?"

"I came to tell the four of you that Lady Hestia has arranged a feast for us. She mentioned that it had
been forever since everyone has gathered together to do something other than fight. I think she wants to reconcile everyone." No one noticed him roll his eyes at the thought.

Percy and Nico exchanged smiles. "She is the goddess of the hearth."

"Her family is together, its obvious she's happy." Nico agreed with what Percy stated.

"Shall we? Everyone is probably waiting for us in the banquet hall." They all agreed.

Zeus stared at Hera waiting for her to say something. She was staring at him coldly, like she always did after one of his conquests.

"I haven't done anything yet." Zeus protested, tired of waiting for her to say something.

"That matters?" Hera raised an eyebrow.

"Of course it does!" Zeus protested.

"Really? What am I even angry about?" She asked exasperatedly.

"My future daughter." He told her without any hesitation.

"No."

"What?" His eyes widened, completely surprised.

"Well a little, but she hasn't even been born yet. And I'd like to concentrate more on the books about our future than care that you have cheated on me once again."

Zeus opened his mouth to interrupt, but Hera pressed on.

"What I am angry about, is that it seems that you are fighting with Poseidon once again. And if a hero is involved in it, then it means that its serious. And it doesn't matter it has yet to occur, as you are stubborn enough to still fight with him."

"I am not."

"I hope so milord. Otherwise we may all be in grave danger."

"Grave danger? I don't understand. Heroes have been involved in our fights before." Zeus argued.

"Enough to have us learn about their stories long before hand? And as if strong children have ever stopped you three from having children before. Zeus, I think this is much more serious. Come Hestia has arranged a feast for us."

"What do you think my dove?" Hades asked.

"There's going to be yet another hero who will venture into our realm." Persephone agreed.

"Our realm? You mean his realm. Eat some bread darling, you're getting so pale."

"Mother! Please, this is serious!"

Demeter huffed but fell silent nonetheless.
"So?"

"What I don't understand milord, is that why the boy's mother vanished in a shower of gold. Why would you care about his mother?"

"Why would I care about Jackson?" Hades countered.


Hades shook his head. "Zeus's daughter made sense. I wouldn't hold such a grudge against Poseidon."

"He killed me." Alecto snarled upset.

"But you watched him for about a year. If I wanted revenge, I would've had you attack immediately. Not wait for such a long time."

"Does it even actually matter?" Demeter asked irritated.

"Of course it does Demeter."

"Agreed Mother. And please don't even mention the bread."

"You both are insufferable." Demeter declared. "Fine don't take my bread. I was going to tell you that why stress over something that we're going to find out about. It's probably all in the books." With that the goddess huffed and stalked away gracefully.

Hades sighed. "I hate to admit it but she has a point. Thank the gods she wasn't here to hear that." Persephone swatted at Hades' arm before nodding reluctantly. "However, what has you three so rattled?"

The Furies all straightened abruptly. "What ever do you mean milord?" Megaera asked innocently.

"You know what I mean." Hades said blankly.

The three exchanged glances. "I apologize milord, but due to the Fates we cannot tell you our reason."

Hades sighed. "Alright. Hestía mentioned that we would meet for some feast."

"Let's go." Persephone agreed linking her arm with her husband's.

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"But sister mine!" Apollo argued.

"No Apollo, for the last time leave me and my huntresses alone!"

Hermes glanced at Zoë, "Does this happen a lot? She glanced at him uncomfortably and nodded quickly. Hermes laughed. "Oh. You're a new huntress right? Don't worry, Artemis won't hate you for talking with me. I'm the messenger of the gods, talking with me doesn't affect your oath at all."

Zoë nodded a little relieved. "I see Lord Hermes. I understand." Despite her words, she quickly turned her attention back to Apollo and Artemis.

"I'm just looking out for my little sister!"
"I'm not your little sister. I was born first! Besides Orion is a fine man. He isn't like the rest."

"How do you know that? That's what they say about all of them! But they turn out to be complete bastards!"

"Oh you mean like you? Enough that Diane would rather be a tree?"

Apollo stopped stunned. He stared at Artemis who immediately wished she could take her words back. "A-Apollo."

"No. I see Artemis. Thank you for the insight." Apollo turned to leave.

Hermes stepped in watching the two of them carefully. "You two, Hestia has arranged a feast. You guys will go right?"

"Yes." Apollo snapped. "You coming Hermes?"

"Yeah." Hermes glanced back at Artemis before heading after the sun god.

"Lady Artemis?" Zoë asked hesitantly.

"Let's go, Zoë." Artemis whispered her face perfectly blank.

"Yes, milady." Zoë answered quietly sensing the somber mood over Artemis.

"Father. How do you tolerate her?" Triton asked furiously.

"Triton. I like Athena no more than you do. But do not forget that you cannot let your anger get the best of you. Control yourself and wait until you can strike her where it hurts." Poseidon instructed.

"You both can discuss your hatred of Athena at another time." Amphitrite broke in. "I'm more interested in learning about this son of yours. Percy Jackson. He has the name of your brother's son. How unoriginal." The goddess of the sea sneered angrily.

"Amphitrite he hasn't even been born yet. It will take place millennium in the future. Why are you getting upset over it now?" Poseidon protested.

"Why? Did you just ask why? Milord I never react to one of your demigod children. I remind you that I am not Hera. But you cannot expect me to actually like one of your children which you have by betraying me."

"It's not a betrayal. When we first got married you very clearly stated you didn't care about what I did so long as it didn't threaten your position in the kingdom!"

Triton rolled their eyes. "Here they go again. Same old story." He said in disgust. He glanced up at Orion who was watching this all in shock. "You get used to it."

"Is that all they do?" Orion asked curiously.


At this point Amphitrite and Poseidon's arguing had reached high levels of volume. "Why can you not be understanding? Even you must realize that this must be important since the Fates are allowing us to learn and change the future? Poseidon demanded.
"Agreed milord. Then perhaps you shall start by not siring the demigod child!" Amphitrite retorted stubbornly.

"You'd have me ensure that the boy isn't born? That won't eliminate the threat!"

"It may reduce it!"

"You sound like Zeus. Thinking that the Fates' will can be changed."

"They want us to this time. After all why else would we be learning the future!"

"ENOUGH!" Triton roared. "Both you are not just immortals but also rulers of the sea. Don't air your problems like this."

"Are you lecturing us?" Amphitrite asked softly but dangerously.

"YES. I dare." Triton told her bluntly. "Anyway Lady Hestia has arranged a feast and awaits our arrival. If you two believe that you can pause in your arguing be sure to join us." He told his parents scathingly before glaring at Orion to walk with him. The demigod frightened by Triton's rage complied hurriedly. The two left Poseidon and Amphitrite staring after them.

A few moments after they were out of sight, Poseidon gave a slight laugh. "He's strong that one. Worthy of being my heir."

Amphitrite nodded, silently agreeing about her son's capability.

The two looked at each other and sighed simultaneously. Poseidon smiled. "Shall we milady?" He asked offering her his arm. Amphitrite courteously took it, her jealousy melting away. After all at the end of the day, he was her husband.

Theseus stared at Athena, as she walked throughout the halls of Olympus. "Athena..." He began but she cut him off.

"Who does Triton think he is? And Poseidon too for that matter? All of them insulting me. Me! The goddess of wisdom. Are they all insane?" She ranted angrily.

"Actually they were pointing out that about your daughter and how she was incapable-," He fell silent due to her unleashing a glare upon him.

"Actually they were pointing out that about your daughter and how she was incapable-," He fell silent due to her unleashing a glare upon him.

He sighed in defeat. "Fine. Can we please not talk about my family though?"

Athena had the decency to blush. "I apologize Theseus. You're just so easy to talk to sometimes I forget that you're Poseidon's child."

"That's what I mean. No more backhanded comments like that either. Or during the reading. You don't even know Percy, and he is my half-brother, perhaps he too could win your favor?"

"I doubt it." Athena scoffed, then relented. "But I can try for you, even if he seems to be an idiotic imbecile."

Theseus was about to admonish Athena once again, when a laugh rang out.

"Trying to help Athena have manners?" Dionysus drawled. Ariadne gave Dionysus a sharp look and squeezed his arm, but otherwise said nothing. Theseus stared at her in surprise. Ariadne noticed him staring at her, but did nothing. Dionysus noticed it too, and unlike his wife immediately took action.
"Did you know Ariadne? It was Athena who told Barnacle Boy to leave you behind." Dionysus said conversationally. Ariadne sighed internally. She had heard the story many times and other than when the duo were with the Maenads, she had left the past behind her.

As her old teacher Daedalus used to tell her, 'Through forget will come strength.' That, and she would no longer give anyone the ability to weaken her. Unfortunately for her, her husband could and evidently would hold a grudge. Against all heroes, not just Theseus, she slowly came to realize. By the time she snapped out of her thoughts, Athena and Dionysus were ready to pounce at one another.

When she glanced at Theseus, she saw that he was livid with irritation. Ariadne pursed her lips. He never did know how to handle a situation. That had been her job.

"As delightful as the encounter has been Athena," Ariadne cut in smoothly. "We should get going. Hestia has arranged for a feast. You'll get your chance to talk there."

Athena nodded furiously. "Agreed. Let's go Theseus." The wisdom goddess commanded no doubt wanting to badmouth everyone in order to vent her anger to the demigod.

"No."

"Excuse me?" Athena asked not comprehending the answer.

"No. I'll see you later Lady Athena, but at the moment I am in no mood to converse." With that, Theseus sprinted away to some other part of Olympus.

After seeing Athena left behind on her own, Ariadne began to pull Dionysus away. He looked at her curiously. "Feast?"

"Yes. One we're getting late to." Ariadne agreed quickening her pace.

"Ariadne..." She put a finger to his lips, silencing the god of wine and madness.

"I love you. Now let's go."

Hephaestus glanced at Hercules. "Any reason you're coming with me?" He asked gruffly.

Hercules started before replying. "I thought that seeing you build things would be a nice change. Especially since I keep tearing them down."

"You mean the Huntress."

"You know?" Hercules asked astounded.

"I am a god." Hephaestus replied dryly.

"I-I didn't mean..." Hercules stammered. Hephaestus laughed and waved his apologies away.

Hercules sighed. "Well yeah. I just...I know I shouldn't have left Zoë like that, but I really couldn't do another labor. I never thought she would get disowned."

"Well what are you gonna do about it?"

"Do?" Hercules echoed.

"Yes, do. It wouldn't do any good to just sit around feeling sorry after all."
"What do you think I should do?" Hercules inquired hoping for some advice.

"No idea. Its your problem. You've got to fix it." Hephaestus answered, no longer entirely paying attention to Hercules. He had started to fiddle with some scraps of metal and was twisting to form an object. What that was, he wasn't quite sure yet.

He paused when he realized Hercules was no longer walking beside him. "What's the matter boy?" Hephaestus asked walking back to see why Hercules had stopped.

The demigod blushed. "Sorry. I was just surprised. That's all."

"At what?" Hephaestus asked growing irritated at the lack of answers. This was why he preferred automatons, they knew how to answer a god properly.

Hercules hesitated, before pointing towards a sight Hephaestus hated but was also weary of. "That."

There were two immortals locked in each other's embrace in an intimate manner.

"Come on." Hephaestus said walking briskly towards the duo. He couldn't end it, but he would never condone seeing it. Hercules quietly followed behind him.

Ares and Aphrodite were enjoying some time to themselves. Well they weren't entirely enjoying, there was a quite a bit of arguing happening as well. Mainly about their future children.

"Don't look at me like that. You have children in the future too." Ares snapped, pulling Aphrodite closer to him.

She smacked his chest. "I haven't been going on about them like you have."

"Because yours haven't come up yet much!"

"Don't tell me you haven't been imagining the children's mothers! And lying is useless. I am the goddess of love and lust remember."

Ares reached up to brush away strands of hair from Aphrodite's face. "As if any of those women could hold a candle to you, Pearl."

"Then why is my form continuously changing for you? Why isn't it the one I wish to be in at the moment?" She asked wrapping her arms around his waist.

Ares paused. She had gotten him. Aphrodite glared at him angrily, but just as she was about to untangle herself from him he caught her lips in a kiss. She swooned as their tongues battled for dominance and reached up to fist his hair. Between kisses she muttered curses at Ares.

Ares just grinned, and continued kissing her. He let his hands wander, hoping to do a little more in their break. Unfortunately Aphrodite stopped him. "I should go. You're not the only one who gets to enjoy mortals," she told him. Ares growled and held on to her tighter.

He removed her hair and started peppering kisses on her neck. He bit out "Not today."

"Oh?" Aphrodite asked slyly. "And who'll stop me?"

"I won't give you a chance to leave. Not when I'm at your beck and call."

The two immortals continued to express their intimate feelings towards each other. They got so
caught up in it that they didn't realize when they had been joined by two others. At least until one of them cleared his throat.

"Lady Aphrodite? L-Lord Ares?" Hercules spoke up. The two Olympians disentangled from each other. Ares was about to snap at Hercules for interrupting them, when Hephaestus entered his peripheral.

Next to him Aphrodite smiled coyly at the blacksmith. "Hello husband dear." Ares clenched a fist in anger. He hated having to share her with the ugly brute and it didn't help when she'd address him with such terms. Always reminding him of his status beneath the cripple.

"Aphrodite." Hephaestus acknowledged curtly. "I think we should all head back. Hestia awaits us at her feast."

"That will be enjoyable." Aphrodite agreed wrapping her arm around Ares'. "I'll see you there husband."

"As will I, you wife mine."

Ares bristled but followed Aphrodite nonetheless. The goddess of beauty rolled her eyes at him. "Just words, Ares. No need to get riled up."

He kissed her, noticing that Hephaestus was still watching them, hard on the lips. She knew why he had done so but didn't protest. Arm in arm they walked toward the hall. Hercules and Hephaestus silently followed a little behind them.

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"I think its very kind of you to give them all a feast, Lady Hestia." Perseus told her as he watched her conjure a feast worthy of the gods.

Hestia smiled at him kindly. "I am the goddess of the hearth. And this family fights more than they breathe. I hope that they will be able to learn something from this endeavor."

Perseus shrugged, not sharing his thoughts on the subject. Honestly he had no hope. But he did want to see the adventures his namesake would go through, and if possible help guide him for the future. Life already seemed to be just as hard in the future as it was now.

"I know you don't believe anything will change." Hestia said, snapping the son of Zeus out of his thoughts. He began to protest but she silenced him. "I don't have any high hopes either. But as the one who keeps the peace I truly wish that one day things will change."

"Who knows Lady Hestia? Just perhaps one day they will. I seem to remember Percy mentioning that Hades has a cabin at camp. Small changes do add up."

Hestia smiled at him. "Hope is the key then." Perseus nodded. The demigod and goddess sat down at the table and silently waited for the others to come in. They were at peace until they noticed the looks of everybody coming in. Some of them looked curious and amused, while most looked hurt and angry. Hestia and Perseus shared a glance certain that most of them had spent their time fighting.

"Everybody, please sit down. Eat. Enjoy." Hestia welcomed.

"Thank you Lady Hestia." Percy and Nico said simultaneously. Hestia smiled at the two futuristic heroes. Like she had said to Perseus, there was always hope.

"Agreed Aunt Hestia." Apollo threw in without looking at Artemis. The goddess of the Hunt
remained downcast. Hestia looked around watching Hephaestus mutter angrily at his food, or Demeter frowning continuously at Persephone and Hades. Well. Hestia hadn't thought that the change would occur overnight. The fact that despite their arguments they were able to sit here together peacefully. That in itself was an enormous change.

Unfortunately, unlike what she had planned, they all silently ate their food. The ones who had spent their time peacefully also noticed this, but felt too uncomfortable to speak up either. Quickly and efficiently they all ate and returned to the throne room to continue the reading.

As they all filed out, Hestia sighed. It would take quite some time to ensure they were all okay. Luckily they still had quite a number of books to go through. She was the last person to go back to the throne room. There Megaera held the book in her talons.

The Fury smiled mischievously and flipped the book open. She read aloud...**I Am Offered A Quest**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Hope you guys enjoy the chapter. Different from usual since it has pure interacting no reading involved. Let me know what you all think!

So I feel everyone's gonna ask so I'll just answer now. Hercules isn't as awful as everyone thinks. I mean he did become a god, and save a lot of people. And it is true that if he had credited Zoë he would've had to do another labor. Eurystheus was a very petty man who enjoyed seeing Hercules suffer. So he didn't bother giving her the credit. Rude yes, but he was mourning the wife and children, Hera caused him to kill. That and a lot of awful, life-threatening labors. I think he was just too done with life, to realize how his actions would implicate Zoë. Sort of like Percy and Annabeth, with Reyna and Circe. As far as him being a jerk in the HoO series...millennia of being a god catching up to him? I have no idea, but I presume as a demigod he would be very different. So my Hercules really isn't the Hercules of the books.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, Chiron moved me to cabin three.

"Wait what happened again?" Orion asked confused.

"I got claimed. Officially."

I didn't have to share with anybody. I had plenty of room for all my stuff: the Minotaur's horn, one set of spare clothes, and a toiletry bag. I got to sit at my own dinner table, pick all my own activities, call "lights out" whenever I felt like it, and not listen to anybody else.

"Sounds awesome." Came several voices.

And I was absolutely miserable.

Thalia and Jason both shot Percy sympathetic looks, remembering their own time in the Zeus cabin.

Just when I'd started to feel accepted, to feel I had a home in cabin eleven and I might be a normal kid- or as normal as you can be when you're a half-blood-I'd been separated out as if I had some rare disease.

Now Nico knew exactly how Percy felt.

Nobody mentioned the hellhound, but I got the feeling they were all talking about it behind my back. The attack had scared everybody. It sent two messages: one, that I was the son of the Sea God; and two, monsters would stop at nothing to kill me. They could even invade a camp that had always been considered safe.

"How did that happen? I wouldn't want to hurt you." Hades said in confusion.

"But you would hurt my kid?" Zeus looked up bemused. Nico and Percy glanced at each other, knowing exactly why Hades hated Thalia's existence.

Hades shrugged. "Not really. But Poseidon's kid would be even lower on my hate list."

Nico stared at his father. He had a hate list?

The other campers steered clear of me as much as possible. Cabin eleven was too nervous to have sword class with me after what I'd done to the Ares folks in the woods, so my lessons with Luke became one-on-one. He pushed me harder than ever, and wasn't afraid to bruise me up in the process.

"Of course not." Thalia and Nico muttered bitterly.

"Eh-I was thankful for that honestly." Percy said aloud.

Thalia and Nico both stared at him, as if he were insane. "What? It helped in the future. A lot, actually."
"You're going to need all the training you can get," he promised, as we were working with swords and flaming torches. "Now let's try that viper-beheading strike again. Fifty more repetitions."

Annabeth still taught me Greek in the mornings, but she seemed distracted. Every time I said something, she scowled at me, as if I'd just poked her between the eyes.

"Rude."

"Really?" Hermes questioned Demeter. She didn't seem like the type to say that.

"Of course. I wouldn't want any of my demigod to hate Hades' demigod children, may he never have any. That's between us gods, not them. Now if a god had a problem with a demigod, that's a different story."

After lessons, she would walk away muttering to herself: "Quest...Poseidon?...Dirty rotten...Got to make a plan..."

"Excuse me?" Poseidon bellowed angrily. Athena winced, but said nothing.

"Does your child have no respect for the gods?" Triton asked dangerously.

"I'm sure she does!" Athena protested, glaring at the future demigods to back her up.

Thalia and Percy looked at each other. Annabeth hated Poseidon, until she became Percy's friend, she hated Hera, there was no love between her and Hermes...The two came to the conclusion that most of the gods were going to really not like Annabeth.

Meanwhile Athena was waiting, but they both remained silent. The sea gods both angrily sat back in their thrones adding it to the list of reasons as to why they disliked Athena so much.

Even Clarisse kept her distance, though her venomous looks made it clear she wanted to kill me for breaking her magic spear. I wished she would just yell or punch me or something. I'd rather get into fights every day than be ignored.

"Same." Jason agreed. Percy grinned at the blond.

Nico gave the pair a strange look but said nothing. He really wasn't liking Jason at the moment.

I knew somebody at camp resented me,

"Gee, I wonder who that could be?" Thalia asked sarcastically. Nico agreed with her, while Percy just sighed at his friends' stubbornness.

"I don't know. Clarisse doesn't seem the type to do something drastic. It just said that she was keeping her distance." Jason pointed out.

Percy shook his head. "They don't mean Clarisse."

because one night I came into my cabin and found a mortal newspaper dropped inside the doorway, a copy of the New York Daily News, opened to the Metro page. The article took me almost an hour to read, because the angrier I got, the more the words floated around on the page.
"Dyslexia." Jason grimaced. Now that he had regained his memories, he remembered how hard it was to do all the paperwork that came from being a praetor. And how it took forever.

BOY AND MOTHER STILL MISSING AFTER

FREAK CAR ACCIDENT

BY EILEEN SMYTHE

Sally Jackson and son Percy are still missing one week after their mysterious disappearance. The family's badly burned '78 Camaro was discovered last Saturday on a north Long Island road with the roof ripped off and the front axle broken. The car had flipped and skidded for several hundred feet before exploding.

Mother and son had gone for a weekend vacation to Montauk, but left hastily, under mysterious circumstances. Small traces of blood were found in the car and near the scene of the wreck, but there were no other signs of the missing Jacksons. Residents in the rural area reported seeing nothing unusual around the time of the accident.

Ms. Jackson's husband, Gabe Ugliano, claims that his stepson, Percy Jackson, is a troubled child who has been kicked out of numerous boarding schools and has expressed violent tendencies in the past.

"What?" Nico asked carefully, his eyes getting darker.

"Nico, no. You don't want to reveal your parentage remember? Control your emotions." Percy hissed.

Police would not say whether son Percy is a suspect in his mother's disappearance, but they have not ruled out foul play.

Thalia crackled with lightning. "Thalia?" Jason asked, never having seen his sister get like that.

"You would never hurt Sally." Thalia said angrily.

"Thals. cut it out. Its in the past and honestly Gabe's opinion really doesn't matter to me." Percy attempted to soothe her. "It all works out in the end."

Thalia and Nico were obviously gritting their teeth but remained silent.

Below are recent pictures of Sally Jackson and Percy. Police urge anyone with information to call the following toll-free crime-stoppers hotline.

The phone number was circled in black marker.

I wadded up the paper and threw it away, then flopped down in my bunk bed in the middle of my empty cabin.

"Lights out," I told myself miserably.

"That's awful." Demeter spat angrily. It was far too reminiscent of how she had felt when she had lost Persephone, and to the same god then as well.
That night, I had my worst dream yet.

I was running along the beach in a storm. This time, there was a city behind me. Not New York. The sprawl was different: buildings spread farther apart, palm trees and low hills in the distance.

About a hundred yards down the surf, two men were fighting. They looked like TV wrestlers, muscular, with beards and long hair. Both wore flowing Greek tunics, one trimmed in blue, the other in green.

Poseidon and Zeus stared at each other perplexed. The two couldn't figure out whether they liked their descriptions or not.

They grappled with each other, wrestled, kicked and head-butted, and every time they connected, lightning flashed, the sky grew darker, and the wind rose.

I had to stop them. I didn't know why. But the harder I ran, the more the wind blew me back, until I was running in place, my heels digging uselessly in the sand.

Over the roar of the storm, I could hear the blue-robed one yelling at the green-robed one, Give it back! Give it back!

"Give what back?" Zeus asked immediately, suspicious.

Like a kindergartner fighting over a toy.

There was a pause, before everyone from the future burst out laughing.

"What is a kindergartner?" Hermes asked, not recognizing the term.

In between hysteria, Thalia bit out "A five-year old mortal child."

That set everyone but Zeus off.

The waves got bigger, crashing into the beach, spraying me with salt.

I yelled, Stop it! Stop fighting!

"We've been telling them that for millennia." Hera rolled her eyes.

Zeus and Poseidon grumbled at the statement but remained quiet.

The ground shook. Laughter came from somewhere under the earth, and a voice so deep and evil it turned my blood to ice.

The faces of everyone but the Greek, future trio turned pale.

Come down, little hero, the voice crooned. Come down!

Instinctively Nico and Thalia both grabbed onto one of Percy's hands each, as if to ensure he would be unable to leave. Percy raised an eyebrow at their gesture, but he was touched. He gently squeezed their hands as if to reassure them that he was right there.

The sand split beneath me, opening up a crevice straight down to the center of the earth. My
feet slipped, and darkness swallowed me.

At this point, Nico and Thalia were strangling Percy's hands. He yelped, "Guys!"

They let go immediately. "Sorry!"

I woke up, sure I was falling.

I was still in bed in cabin three. My body told me it was morning, but it was dark outside, and thunder rolled across the hills. A storm was brewing. I hadn't dreamed that.

"Is it because of the boy? I mean, yes Poseidon broke the oath. But it shouldn't make me so angry." Zeus asked. Percy didn't answer.

I heard a clopping sound at the door, a hoof knocking on the threshold.

"Come in?"

Grover trotted inside, looking worried. "Mr. D wants to see you."

"Why?" Half the throne room asked. Dionysus never wanted to see heroes.

Megaera put up a claw, signaling them to wait.

"Why?"

"He wants to kill...I mean, I'd better let him tell you."

Ariadne shot her husband a disapproving look. He shrugged.

Nervously, I got dressed and followed, sure that I was in huge trouble.

"You think Kelp Head?" Thalia laughed.

Percy pouted at her.

For days, I'd been half expecting a summons to the Big House. Now that I was declared a son of Poseidon, one of the Big Three gods who weren't supposed to have kids, I figured it was a crime for me just to be alive. The other gods had probably been debating the best way to punish me for existing, and now Mr. D was ready to deliver their verdict.

"That's not how it works." Thalia and Nico deadpanned.

"I didn't know, okay?! I was still new to the demigod thing, and the oath making me illegal freaked me out! Er...more illegal I mean."

"What do you mean more illegal? How were you illegal to begin with?" Perseus asked.

"Our parents weren't married when they had us. This means we were born out of wedlock. Society considers us as wrong." Thalia shrugged, remembering the angry taunts her drunk mother had made.

The people from the past were silent after learning that. Some glanced at Hera out of the corner of their eyes and were surprised to see that even she looked like she had been struck in the face.

Over Long Island Sound, the sky looked like ink soup coming to a boil. A hazy curtain of rain
was coming in our direction. I asked Grover if we needed an umbrella.

"No," he said. "It never rains here unless we want it to."

I pointed at the storm. "What the heck is that, then?"

He glanced uneasily at the sky. "It'll pass around us. Bad weather always does."

I realized he was right. In the week I'd been here, it had never even been overcast. The few rain clouds I'd seen had skirted right around the edges of the valley.

But this storm... This one was huge.

"Meaning Dad's gonna unleash his rage." Apollo pointed out.

Everyone but Zeus agreed.

At the volleyball pit, the kids from Apollo's cabin were playing a morning game against the satyrs. Dionysus's twins were walking around in the strawberry fields, making the plants grow. Everybody was going about their normal business, but they looked tense. They kept their eyes on the storm.

"Mournful? They should be winning!" Apollo exclaimed.

"Maybe they are. That's why its mournful for the satyrs." Artemis offered. Apollo said nothing, his face going blank.

Grover and I walked up to the front porch of the Big House. Dionysus sat at the pinochle table in his tiger-striped Hawaiian shirt with his Diet Coke, just as he had on my first day. Chiron sat across the table in his fake wheel-chair. They were playing against invisible opponents-two sets of cards hovering in the air.

"Well, well," Mr. D said without looking up. "Our little celebrity."

"Dionysus is secretly Severus Snape?" Jason asked.

Percy snorted and stared at the blond. Jason shrugged, "You aren't the only one that can make references."

Percy threw his hands up. "Noted."

I waited.

"Come closer," Mr. D said. "And don't expect me to kowtow to you, mortal, just because old Barnacle-Beard is your father."

Poseidon glowered at Dionysus, but said nothing. He knew Dionysus' attitude was due to his wife no his own pride.

A net of lightning flashed across the clouds. Thunder shook the windows of the house.

"Blah, blah, blah," Dionysus said.

Zeus glared at Dionysus for showing him disrespect. Dionysus merely yawned, having no interest or
worry in regards to Zeus’ anger.

Chiron feigned interest in his pinochle cards. Grover cowered by the railing, his hooves clopping back and forth.

"If I had my way," Dionysus said, "I would cause your molecules to erupt in flames. We'd sweep up the ashes and be done with a lot of trouble. But Chiron seems to feel this would be against my mission at this cursed camp: to keep you little brats safe from harm."

"Really?" Persephone said sarcastically. The god of wine shrugged.

"Spontaneous combustion is a form of harm, Mr. D," Chiron put in.

A pause. The entire throne room burst out laughing.

"Nonsense," Dionysus said. "Boy wouldn't feel a thing. Nevertheless, I've agreed to restrain myself I'm thinking of turning you into a dolphin instead, sending you back to your father."

"One would think that you would tire of turning my children into dolphins." Poseidon said.

"Hey, at least I didn't say I'd turn him mad too." Dionysus countered.

"Mr. D-" Chiron warned.

"Oh, all right," Dionysus relented. "There's one more option. But it's deadly foolishness. " Dionysus rose, and the invisible players' cards dropped to the table. "I'm off to Olympus for the emergency meeting. If the boy is still here when I get back, I'll turn him into an Atlantic bottlenose. Do you understand? And Perseus Jackson, if you're at all smart, you'll see that's a much more sensible choice than what Chiron feels you must do."

"You realize he would turn the boy back into a human?" Amphitrite asked.

"He didn't do it for Chrysaor."

"Chrysaor was a pirate who deserved it." Poseidon said rolling his eyes.

Dionysus picked up a playing card, twisted it, and it became a plastic rectangle. A credit card? No. A security pass.

He snapped his fingers.

The air seemed to fold and bend around him. He became a hologram, then a wind, then he was gone, leaving only the smell of fresh-pressed grapes lingering behind.

"You know I've always wondered, is what our parent's...odour what we smell like to monsters?" Percy asked curiously.

The others shrugged not having an answer.

"Ask Grover." Thalia advised.

Chiron smiled at me, but he looked tired and strained. "Sit, Percy, please. And Grover."

We did.
Chiron laid his cards on the table, a winning hand he hadn't gotten to use.

"Tell me, Percy," he said. "What did you make of the hellhound?"

"It wasn't Mrs. O'Leary." Percy replied.

"Who?"

Thalia, Nico and Percy grinned at each other. "A friend."

Just hearing the name made me shudder.

Chiron probably wanted me to say, Heck, it was nothing. I eat hellhounds for breakfast. But I didn't feel like lying.

"For once." Thalia coughed. Percy pushed her half-heartedly.

"It scared me, " I said. "If you hadn't shot it, I'd be dead."

"You'll meet worse, Percy. Far worse, before you're done."

"Done...With what?"

"Your quest, of course. Will you accept it?"

I glanced at Grover, who was crossing his fingers.

"Why?...Oh right the searcher's license. What is he searching for anyway?" Jason asked.

"Spoilers." The Greek trio chorused.

"Um, sir," I said, "you haven't told me what it is yet."

Chiron grimaced. "Well, that's the hard part, the details."

Thunder rumbled across the valley. The storm clouds had now reached the edge of the beach. As far as I could see, the sky and the sea were boiling together.

"Poseidon and Zeus," I said. "They're fighting over something valuable... Something that was stolen, aren't they?"

Zeus and Poseidon both leaned forward, wanting to know what it was.

Chiron and Grover exchanged looks.

Chiron sat forward in his wheelchair. "How did you know that?"

My face felt hot. I wished I hadn't opened my big mouth. "The weather since Christmas has been weird, like the sea and the sky are fighting. Then I talked to Annabeth, and she'd overheard something about a theft. And...I've also been having these dreams."

"I hate demigod dreams." All the demigods said simultaneously, except for Perseus.

They all turned to him. He shrugged. "I don't. They can be helpful." The others grudgingly accepted his logic.
"I knew it," Grover said.

"Hush, satyr," Chiron ordered.

"But it is his quest!" Grover's eyes were bright with excitement. "It must be!"

"I hate quests." Every demigod but Thalia said this time. But when they turned to her, she didn't offer an explanation.

"Only the Oracle can determine." Chiron stroked his bristly beard. "Nevertheless, Percy, you are correct. Your father and Zeus are having their worst quarrel in centuries. They are fighting over something valuable that was stolen. To be precise: a lightning bolt."

"...WHAT?!" Zeus leapt to his feet. "YOU DARE STEAL MY LIGHTNING BOLT BOY?!"

"No!" Percy shot up. "Listen Lord Zeus, you've seen my thoughts, you know I haven't. Besides the truth will be revealed in the books, so for now the only thing we can do it read on."

"Don't tell me what to do." Zeus glared at Percy threateningly. "READ!" He bellowed furiously.

I laughed nervously. "A what?"

"Do not take this lightly," Chiron warned. "I'm not talking about some tinfoil-covered zigzag you'd see in a second-grade play. I'm talking about a two-foot-long cylinder of high-grade celestial bronze, capped on both ends with god-level explosives."

"Oh."

"Zeus's master bolt," Chiron said, getting worked up now.

"As he should be!" Zeus exclaimed.

"The symbol of his power, from which all other lightning bolts are patterned. The first weapon made by the Cyclopes for the war against the Titans, the bolt that sheered the top off Mount Etna and hurled Kronos from his throne; the master bolt, which packs enough power to make mortal hydrogen bombs look like firecrackers."

"And it's missing?"

Everyone in the room was painfully aware of Zeus breathing loudly.

"Stolen," Chiron said.

"By who?"

"By whom," Chiron corrected. Once a teacher, always a teacher. "By you."

"PROOF!" Zeus yelled pointing at the book.

"Just read a little further, before declaring your verdict?"

Zeus relented.

My mouth fell open.
"At least"—Chiron held up a hand—"that's what Zeus thinks.

"So you really didn't?" Zeus asked dubiously.

"No, I didn't!" Percy replied vehemently.

During the winter solstice, at the last council of the gods, Zeus and Poseidon had an argument. The usual nonsense: 'Mother Rhea always liked you best, ' Air disasters are more spectacular than sea disasters, ' et cetera.

"Still?" All the other gods groaned.

Zeus and Poseidon huffed at their attitudes. They were all good topics to fight over.

Afterward, Zeus realized his master bolt was missing, taken from the throne room under his very nose. He immediately blamed Poseidon. Now, a god cannot usurp another god's symbol of power directly—that is forbidden by the most ancient of divine laws. But Zeus believes your father convinced a human hero to take it."

"But I didn't."

"Patience and listen, child,"

"But Percy doesn't have any patience." All of the future demigods countered. Percy glared at them, while Nico and Thalia shared a look. How well did Percy and Jason know each other?

Chiron said. "Zeus has good reason to be suspicious. The forges of the Cyclopes are under the ocean, which gives Poseidon some influence over the makers of his brother's lightning. Zeus believes Poseidon has taken the master bolt, and is now secretly having the Cyclopes build an arsenal of illegal copies, which might be used to topple Zeus from his throne. The only thing Zeus wasn't sure about was which hero Poseidon used to steal the bolt. Now Poseidon has openly claimed you as his son. You were in New York over the winter holidays. You could easily have snuck into Olympus. Zeus believes he has found his thief."

"But I've never even been to Olympus! Zeus is crazy!"

Thunder boomed.

"Lighten up Zeus. It's the truth." Hades said irritably. Hera nodded her assent.

Zeus gaped in disbelief at his wife and brother.

Chiron and Grover glanced nervously at the sky. The clouds didn't seem to be parting around us, as Grover had promised. They were rolling straight over our valley, sealing us in like a coffin lid.

"Er, Percy...?" Grover said. "We don't use the c-word to describe the Lord of the Sky."

"That's right." Zeus said petulantly, a little like a child not getting his favourite food.

The other gods and goddesses tried to hold in their laughter at the King of the Gods.

On the other hand Thalia grimaced. "The c-word? Gods, Goat-boy is pure."
"Perhaps paranoid," Chiron suggested. "Then again, Poseidon has tried to unseat Zeus before. I believe that was question thirty-eight on your final exam..." He looked at me as if he actually expected me to remember question thirty-eight.

"I remember that." Zeus said angrily, then beamed. "I was able to turn you and Apollo into mortals for that. It was fun!"

"Not for us!" Poseidon and Apollo countered, shuddering at the memory.

**How could anyone accuse me of stealing a god's weapon? I couldn't even steal a slice of pizza from Gabe's poker party without getting busted.**

"Lame." Several people called out. Percy only shook his head.

**Chiron was waiting for an answer.**

"Something about a golden net?" I guessed. "Poseidon and Hera and a few other gods...They, like, trapped Zeus and wouldn't let him out until he promised to be a better ruler, right?"

"Correct," Chiron said. "And Zeus has never trusted Poseidon since.

"You realize I was trying to help you?" Poseidon asked Zeus incredulously.

Zeus scowled. "I don't need your help."

Of course, Poseidon denies stealing the master bolt. He took great offense at the accusation. The two have been arguing back and forth for months, threatening war. And now, you've come along-the proverbial last straw."

"I love being the straw that breaks the camel's back." Percy said giddily.

The others all stared at him as if he were insane. Percy shrugged. "Its happened so many times, might as well be happy about it or I might go insane."

"Amen." Hercules agreed, remembering all of his Labors.

"But I'm just a kid!"

"So?" The people from the past asked innocently.

The futures looked at each other. It was depressing to know, that no one in the past thought it wrong to have young children in perilous situations.

"Percy, " Grover cut in, "if you were Zeus, and you already thought your brother was plotting to overthrow you, then your brother suddenly admitted he had broken the sacred oath he took after World War II, that he's fathered a new mortal hero who might be used as a weapon against you... Wouldn't that put a twist in your toga?"

"I've never heard of that expression." Aphrodite frowned. "And I make all expressions when it comes to clothing."

"Its a Greek play on a different expression we will have." Thalia shrugged. She paused. "When did I
become the person who has to explain everything from the future?"

The three boys shrugged. Thalia deadpanned.

"But I didn't do anything. Poseidon-my dad-he didn't really have this master bolt stolen, did he?"

"No!" Poseidon exclaimed outraged. "I would never!"

"I know Dad." Percy said, trying to calm his father down.

Chiron sighed. "Most thinking observers would agree that thievery is not Poseidon's style. But the Sea God is too proud to try convincing Zeus of that.

"You and your ego." Amphitrite sneered. "It'll be the end of us."

"Agreed." Hera said staring at Zeus. The two squirmed in their thrones.

Zeus has demanded that Poseidon return the bolt by the summer solstice. That's June twenty-first, ten days from now. Poseidon wants an apology for being called a thief by the same date. I hoped that diplomacy might prevail, that Hera or Demeter or Hestia would make the two brothers see sense.

All three goddesses scoffed. Chiron thought too highly of Zeus, as if anyone could compete with his obstinacy.

But your arrival has inflamed Zeus's temper. Now neither god will back down. Unless someone intervenes, unless the master bolt is found and returned to Zeus before the solstice, there will be war. And do you know what a full-fledged war would look like, Percy?"

"Bad?" I guessed.

"No kidding." Ares snorted.

"Imagine the world in chaos. Nature at war with itself. Olympians forced to choose sides between Zeus and Poseidon. Destruction. Carnage. Millions dead. Western civilization turned into a battleground so big it will make the Trojan War look like a water-balloon fight."

"Bad," I repeated.

"You, need to seriously upgrade your vocabulary." Theseus told him.

"And you, Percy Jackson, would be the first to feel Zeus's wrath."

"Joyful." Percy winced.

It started to rain. Volleyball players stopped their game and stared in stunned silence at the sky.

I had brought this storm to Half-Blood Hill. Zeus was punishing the whole camp because of me.

'You think rather highly of yourself." Athena jeered.
"He's the son of the sea god. Its his right." Triton declared. He and Athena stared at each other, before breaking away.

I was furious.

"So I have to find the stupid bolt,"

"It is not stupid!" Zeus shrieked about to go on a lecture about how important the Master Bolt is, when Hera rolled her eyes.

"Just keep reading." She ordered Megaera.

I said. "And return it to Zeus."

"What better peace offering," Chiron said, "than to have the son of Poseidon return Zeus's property?"

"Chiron set it up like that." Hercules muttered. When he was looked at questioningly he added, "So you would agree to the quest."

"If Poseidon doesn't have it, where is the thing?"

"I believe I know." Chiron's expression was grim. "Part of a prophecy I had years ago...

"What prophecy?" Percy asked confused. Thalia and Nico shrugged. They had never heard of another prophecy.

Well, some of the lines make sense to me, now. But before I can say more, you must officially take up the quest. You must seek the counsel of the Oracle."

Thalia, Nico and Percy all grimaced.

Jason on the other hand, smiled. "Great, we'll finally see Rachel!"

"No. We won't." Nico countered. Jason shot him a puzzled look.

"Why can't you tell me where the bolt is beforehand?"

"Because if I did, you would be too afraid to accept the challenge."

"Chiron better not try to blame me." Hades said warily.

Percy didn't say a word. Best to deal with one thing at a time.

I swallowed. "Good reason."

"You agree then?"

I looked at Grover, who nodded encouragingly.

Easy for him. I was the one Zeus wanted to kill.

Once again many people burst out in hysterics. "I love your sense of humor." Hermes laughed. "Never change."
"Uh thanks?" Percy said.

"All right," I said. "It's better than being turned into a dolphin."

"I disagree. What good are quests?" Dionysus said matter-of-factly.
The demigods all stared at him astonished.

"Then it's time you consulted the Oracle," Chiron said. "Go upstairs, Percy Jackson, to the attic. When you come back down, assuming you're still sane, we will talk more."

Four flights up, the stairs ended under a green trap-door.

Apollo leaned forward. "Wait, my Oracle lives in the attic? That's not nearly as...awesome enough."
No one responded.

I pulled the cord. The door swung down, and a wooden ladder clattered into place.

The warm air from above smelled like mildew and rotten wood and something else ... A smell I remembered from biology class. Reptiles. The smell of snakes.

Apollo shrugged. "I guess I can be wrong." The Greek trio winced. He had no idea.

I held my breath and climbed.

The attic was filled with Greek hero junk: armor stands covered in cobwebs; once-bright shields pitted with rust; old leather steamer trunks plastered with stickers saying ITHAKA, CIRCE'S ISLE, and LAND OF THE AMAZONS.

Percy grimaced at the mention of all three. Just his luck he had sort of encountered all three too.

One long table was stacked with glass jars filled with pickled things—severed hairy claws, huge yellow eyes, various other parts of monsters. A dusty mounted trophy on the wall looked like a giant snake's head, but with horns and a full set of shark's teeth. The plaque read, HYDRA HEAD #1, WOODSTOCK, N. Y., 1969.

His eyes narrowed. Actually that was suspicious. All of those things had in one way or another interfered on his next quest. What was that word Paul would generally use to describe it? Foreshadowing. Of his life. How much stranger could he get?

By the window, sitting on a wooden tripod stool, was the most gruesome memento of all: a mummy. Not the wrapped-in-cloth kind, but a human female body shrunken to a husk. She wore a tie-dyed sundress, lots of beaded necklaces, and a headband over long black hair. The skin of her face was thin and leathery over her skull, and her eyes were glassy white slits, as if the real eyes had been replaced by marbles; she'd been dead a long, long time.

"Why would my Oracle keep that?" Apollo asked a little disgusted. "Is she into necrophilia?"

He frowned. "Why won't you three answer me?"

"Just...read Lord Apollo. And you'll find out." Nico said, waiting for another explosion to occur.

Looking at her sent chills up my back. And that was before she sat up on her stool and opened
her mouth.

Apollo's eyes widened and he began to shake his head in denial.

A green mist poured from the mummy's mouth, coiling over the floor in thick tendrils, hissing like twenty thousand snakes. I stumbled over myself trying to get to the trap-door, but it slammed shut. Inside my head, I heard a voice, slithering into one ear and coiling around my brain: *I am the spirit of Delphi, speaker of the prophecies of Phoebus Apollo, slayer of the mighty Python. Approach, seeker, and ask.*

"MY ORACLE!" Apollo wailed. "What happened to her?!"

"You'll find out." Percy said after a moment. "Its in the books."

I wanted to say, No thanks, wrong door, just looking for the bathroom.

"Way creepier than Octavian and the stuffed animals." Jason said with wide eyes. He wanted to ask about Rachel, but he figured he wouldn't get any answers.

But I forced myself to take a deep breath.

The mummy wasn't alive. She was some kind of gruesome receptacle for something else, the power that was now swirling around me in the green mist. Apollo flinched with every word. His Oracle and definitely been put under a curse. But who would do such a thing?

But its presence didn't feel evil,

"Of course she's not evil!" Apollo sounded scandalized.

"I know. It just an observation!" Percy quickly reassured him. The poor god looked extremely distressed.

like my demonic math teacher Mrs. Dodds or the Minotaur. It felt more like the Three Fates I'd seen knitting the yarn outside the highway fruit stand: ancient, powerful, and definitely not human. But not particularly interested in killing me, either.

"Particularly? She isn't interested in killing you at all!"

Percy was realizing that he was going to be listening to Apollo defend his Oracle a lot.

I got up the courage to ask, "What is my destiny?"

Thalia snorted. "How much more cliché can you get Jackson?"

"Shut up, Pinecone Face." Percy retorted, his face red.

The mist swirled more thickly, collecting right in front of me and around the table with the pickled monster-part jars. Suddenly there were four men sitting around the table, playing cards. Their faces became clearer. It was Smelly Gabe and his buddies.

The mood dropped even further.
My fists clenched, though I knew this poker party couldn't be real. It was an illusion, made out of mist.

Gabe turned toward me and spoke in the rasping voice of the Oracle:  *You shall go west, and face the god who has turned.*

"God? Which god?" Hephaestus asked curiously. No answer, just like he had expected.

His buddy on the right looked up and said in the same voice:  *You shall find what was stolen, and see it safely returned.*

"Thank the gods." Zeus exclaimed in utter relief.

The guy on the left threw in two poker chips, then said:  *You shall be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.*

"What friend?" Hestia asked worried.

*Luke.* Thalia and Nico both realized. Thalia was surprised, she had never thought that Luke had betrayed Percy in the same way he did her and Annabeth.

Finally, Eddie, our building super, delivered the worst line of all:  *And you shall fail to save what matters most, in the end.*

"Wait what?" Zeus' face dropped. "Not my lightning bolt right?"

"No. We find the Master Bolt...Eventually." Percy said tiredly.

Zeus relaxed then tensed again. "Eventually?" He asked in a squeaky voice. He was ignored.

The figures began to dissolve. At first I was too stunned to say anything, but as the mist retreated, coiling into a huge green serpent and slithering back into the mouth of the mummy, I cried, "Wait! What do you mean? What friend? What will I fail to save?"

"Prophecies don't give you real answers." Jason said in disgust, remembering Octavian's continuous spiel and the one from his own quest to rescue Hera.

"Unless Mars is the one who give it to you." Percy grinned back.

The tail of the mist snake disappeared into the mummy's mouth. She reclined back against the wall. Her mouth closed tight, as if it hadn't been open in a hundred years. The attic was silent again, abandoned, nothing but a room full of mementos.

I got the feeling that I could stand here until I had cobwebs, too, and I wouldn't learn anything else.

Everyone agreed. That was just how prophecies worked.

My audience with the Oracle was over.

"Well?" Chiron asked me.

I slumped into a chair at the pinochle table. "She said I would retrieve what was stolen."
Grover sat forward, chewing excitedly on the remains of a Diet Coke can. "That's great!"

"Right?" Zeus agreed happily with the satyr.

The other Olympians snickered at him, under their breath.

"What did the Oracle say exactly?" Chiron pressed. "This is important."

My ears were still tingling from the reptilian voice. "She...She said I would go west and face a god who had turned. I would retrieve what was stolen and see it safely returned."

"I knew it," Grover said.

"Grover's excited." Nico pointed out.

"He'll get his searcher's license if he helps out on the quest and it's completed right. Of course he is." Percy shrugged.

Chiron didn't look satisfied. "Anything else?"

I didn't want to tell him.

"You should've. Chiron would've helped." Thalia scolded.

What friend would betray me? I didn't have that many.

"Predictable." Zoë said scathingly. Percy just rolled his eyes.

And the last line—I would fail to save what mattered most. What kind of Oracle would send me on a quest and tell me, Oh, by the way, you'll fail.

"Mine!" Apollo said grumpily. Whoever had hurt his Oracle would pay. Big time.

How could I confess that?

"No, " I said. "That's about it."

He studied my face. "Very well, Percy. But know this: the Oracle's words often have double meanings. Don't dwell on them too much. The truth is not always clear until events come to pass."

"Chiron is correct. Many prophecies say one thing but mean another." Hestia said calmly.

I got the feeling he knew I was holding back something bad, and he was trying to make me feel better.

"Best teacher ever." Hercules coughed.

"No doubt." Every demigod Chiron had trained agreed.

"Okay, " I said, anxious to change topics. "So where do I go? Who's this god in the west?"

"Ah, think, Percy, " Chiron said. "If Zeus and Poseidon weaken each other in a war, who stands to gain?"
"No." Hades said irritably. "He didn't."

"Sorry?" Percy asked.

"Somebody else who wants to take over?" I guessed.

"Yes, quite. Someone who harbors a grudge, who has been unhappy with his lot since the world was divided eons ago, whose kingdom would grow powerful with the deaths of millions. Someone who hates his brothers for forcing him into an oath to have no more children, an oath that both of them have now broken."

"Is he insane? People die everyday? War wouldn't do me any good! There would just be more souls." Hades said incredulously.

"We know D-Lord Hades." Nico assured. 

I thought about my dreams, the evil voice that had spoken from under the ground. "Hades."

Chiron nodded. "The Lord of the Dead is the only possibility."

Hades growled softly. Persephone put her hand on his arm, in an attempt to calm him down.


The room cracked. The satyr was the humorous one here.

"A Fury came after Percy," Chiron reminded him. "She watched the young man until she was sure of his identity, then tried to kill him. Furies obey only one lord: Hades."

"I wonder why I would sacrifice one of my Furies to you for an entire year. You don't seem especially important." Hades muttered.

"Gee thanks." Percy replied sarcastically.

"Yes, but-but Hades hates all heroes," Grover protested. "Especially if he has found out Percy is a son of Poseidon..."

"A hellhound got into the forest," Chiron continued. "Those can only be summoned from the Fields of Punishment, and it had to be summoned by someone within the camp. Hades must have a spy here. He must suspect Poseidon will try to use Percy to clear his name. Hades would very much like to kill this young half-blood before he can take on the quest."

"Who does Chiron think I am exactly?" Hades asked bewildered. "As if I have time to waste on a single half-blood."

"James Moriarty." Nico muttered.

"What?" Hades stared at the emo-looking boy strangely.

"You said who does Chiron think you are? I answered."

"Nah. Moriarty is way more...eccentric." Percy objected.

"Yeah. And in love with Sherlock. Or in any case obsessed with him." Thalia agreed.
"Guys. Stop with the pop-culture. I live under a rock." Jason pouted. The other three looked at him in a mixture of pity and shock.

"We'll remedy that." Thalia promised, the other two boys agreeing with her.

"Great," I muttered. "That's two major gods who want to kill me."

"Two?" Demeter asked lost.

"Hades and Zeus." Hera told her.

"But a quest to..." Grover swallowed. "I mean, couldn't the master bolt be in some place like Maine? Maine's very nice this time of year."

"Grover loves Maine." Percy confided.

"Juniper won't like that." Thalia laughed.

"Whose Juniper?"

"His girlfriend."

"Hades sent a minion to steal the master bolt," Chiron insisted.

Alecto hissed furiously in defense of her Master.

"He hid it in the Underworld, knowing full well that Zeus would blame Poseidon. I don't pretend to understand the Lord of the Dead's motives perfectly, or why he chose this time to start a war, but one thing is certain. Percy must go to the Underworld, find the master bolt, and reveal the truth."

"I mean, in a way Chiron isn't wrong."

Hades looked at Percy sharply, and the boy elaborated. "I mean, the truth came clean in the Underworld. As in everything made sense there. It wasn't you Lord Hades." The god of the dead nodded righteously.

A strange fire burned in my stomach. The weirdest thing was: it wasn't fear. It was anticipation. The desire for revenge. Hades had tried to kill me three times so far, with the Fury, the Minotaur, and the hellhound. It was his fault my mother had disappeared in a flash of light. Now he was trying to frame me and my dad for a theft we hadn't committed.

I was ready to take him on.

Hades stared at Percy.

"I may have had another ulterior motive." He admitted.

Besides, if my mother was in the Underworld...

All of the Underworld dwellers groaned.

Whoa, boy, said the small part of my brain that was still sane. You're a kid. Hades is a god.

"Which part? I didn't know it existed!" Thalia exclaimed.
"Shut up." Percy told her.

Grover was trembling. He'd started eating pinochle cards like potato chips.

The poor guy needed to complete a quest with me so he could get his searcher's license, whatever that was, but how could I ask him to do this quest, especially when the Oracle said I was destined to fail? This was suicide.

"You do love suicide missions." Thalia said.

"Leave me alone." Percy groaned.

"Look, if we know it's Hades," I told Chiron, "why can't we just tell the other gods? Zeus or Poseidon could go down to the Underworld and bust some heads."

"That is not how it works." Athena informed him disdainfully.

"Thanks for letting me know." Percy replied sardonically.

"Suspecting and knowing are not the same," Chiron said. "Besides, even if the other gods suspect Hades- and I imagine Poseidon does"

"I probably don't." Poseidon was quick to step in.

Hades stared at him. "Probably?" His tone was accusatory.

"Hey, future remember?" Poseidon shrugged.

-they couldn't retrieve the bolt them-selves. Gods cannot cross each other's territories except by invitation. That is another ancient rule. Heroes, on the other hand, have certain privileges. They can go anywhere, challenge anyone, as long as they're bold enough and strong enough to do it. No god can be held responsible for a hero's actions. Why do you think the gods always operate through humans?"

"I wish Chiron hadn't told you that." All three from the future said collectively. Percy gave an innocent smile in reply. None of them bought it.

"You're saying I'm being used."

Thalia flinched. That had been exactly what Luke used to think.

"I'm saying it's no accident Poseidon has claimed you now. It's a very risky gamble, but he's in a desperate situation. He needs you."

My dad needs me.

Emotions rolled around inside me like bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. I didn't know whether to feel resentful or grateful or happy or angry.

"All of them." Nico advised.

"Several years too late, but thanks." Percy smiled amused.

Poseidon had ignored me for twelve years. Now suddenly he needed me.
"I looked at Chiron. "You've known I was Poseidon's son all along, haven't you?"

"Probably has." Many of the gods agreed.

"I had my suspicions. As I said... I've spoken to the Oracle, too."

I got the feeling there was a lot he wasn't telling me about his prophecy, but I decided I couldn't worry about that right now. After all, I was holding back information too.

"Which you shouldn't have." Demeter reprimanded.

"So let me get this straight," I said. "I'm supposed go to the Underworld and confront the Lord of the Dead."

"For no reason whatsoever." Tisiphone sighed. Percy nodded.

"Check," Chiron said.

"Find the most powerful weapon in the universe."

"You better." Zeus grumbled.

"Check."

"And get it back to Olympus before the summer solstice, in ten days."

"Plenty of time." Ares grinned.

"That's about right."

"Creepiest check list ever." Hermes shook his head.

"Thanks. Chiron and I were really proud." Percy said dramatically.

I looked at Grover, who gulped down the ace of hearts.

"Did I mention that Maine is very nice this time of year?" he asked weakly.

"You don't have to go, " I told him. "I can't ask that of you."

"As if he'll say no." Nico and Thalia both scoffed.

Percy beamed. "Good thing too."

"Oh.." He shifted his hooves. "No...It's just that satyrs and underground places...Well...

He took a deep breath, then stood, brushing the shredded cards and aluminum bits off his T-shirt. "You saved my life, Percy. If...If you're serious about wanting me along, I won't let you down."

"Knew it."

Hermes nodded proudly. "Satyrs never back down from a challenge."

"No kidding." Jason agreed remembering Coach Hedge.
I felt so relieved I wanted to cry, though I didn't think that would be very heroic.

Zoë rolled her eyes but said nothing. She was unable to figure Percy Jackson's nature, he didn't fit any man the Hunters had ever met.

Grover was the only friend I'd ever had for longer than a few months. I wasn't sure what good a satyr could do against the forces of the dead, but I felt better knowing he'd be with me.

"All the way, G-man." I turned to Chiron. "So where do we go? The Oracle just said to go west."

"Again. Prophecies aren't ever specific. You should feel lucky you weren't there at the beginning of...that time. It took forever for us to begin." Thalia ranted.

"The entrance to the Underworld is always in the west. It moves from age to age, just like Olympus. Right now, of course, it's in America."

"Where?"

Chiron looked surprised. "I thought that would be obvious enough. The entrance to the Underworld is in Los Angeles."

"How is that obvious?" Theseus asked.

"There are many earthquakes there. And Hades can crack the earth...I don't know. I just listened to Chiron." Percy shrugged.

"The atmosphere. People are always depressed in Los Angeles because they can sense the presence of the souls underneath them." Nico told them.

There was a collective understanding, occurring throughout the room.

"Oh," I said. "Naturally. So we just get on a plane-"

"NO!" Nico said immediately.

"Unless you have a death wish." Thalia agreed.

"You know what? That's sad. Poseidon wouldn't drown us, and I mean Hades has the Underworld so that doesn't count. So really Zeus is the only one who would kill, if his brother's children were to go in his domain." Jason said distastefully.

"He has no control." Hera told them.

"No!" Grover shrieked. "Percy, what are you thinking? Have you ever been on a plane in your life?"

I shook my head, feeling embarrassed. My mom had never taken me anywhere by plane. She'd always said we didn't have the money. Besides, her parents had died in a plane crash.

Glares were directed towards Zeus. Yet again. He was starting to think that these people simply didn't respect him the way they should.

"Percy, think," Chiron said. "You are the son of the Sea God. Your father's bitterest rival is
Zeus, Lord of the Sky. Your mother knew better than to trust you in an airplane. You would be in Zeus's domain. You would never come down again alive."

"The boy is right. Its selfish and unbecoming of the King of the Gods." Hestia said forcefully.

Zeus mournfully looked down. He, like all the other gods, knew it was bad when Hestia started the lecturing.

Overhead, lightning crackled. Thunder boomed.

"Okay," I said, determined not to look at the storm. "So, I'll travel overland."

"Good idea." Nico muttered.

"Aww, you care!" Percy grinned.

"That's right," Chiron said. "Two companions may accompany you. Grover is one. The other has already vol-unteered, if you will accept her help."

"Annabeth?" Jason guessed. Percy nodded.

"Gee," I said, feigning surprise. "Who else would be stupid enough to volunteer for a quest like this?"

"You called the daughter of Athena stupid?" Thalia asked half-impressed, half-shocked.

"You're surprised?" Percy countered.

The air shimmered behind Chiron.

Annabeth became visible, stuffing her Yankees cap into her back pocket.

"How long had she been there? Its not right to listen in on other people's conversations. Did no one teach her that?" Demeter demanded, reminded of the many times Hades had done the very thing when she was talking to her Kore.

"I've been waiting a long time for a quest, seaweed brain," she said. "Athena is no fan of Poseidon,"

"Good, because she doesn't have the sea's favor either." Triton stated, shooting the wisdom goddess a look of contempt.

but if you're going to save the world, I'm the best person to keep you from messing up."

"If you do say so yourself," I said. "I suppose you have a plan, wise girl?"

Her cheeks colored. "Do you want my help or not?"

"That's a no then. Why does she think she's special again?" Triton jeered.

Athena glanced at him, opened her mouth but then looked away just as quickly.

The truth was, I did. I needed all the help I could get.

"Well..." Amphitrite didn't continue.
"A trio," I said. "That'll work."

"Excellent," Chiron said. "This afternoon, we can take you as far as the bus terminal in Manhattan. After that, you are on your own."

Lightning flashed. Rain poured down on the meadows that were never supposed to have violent weather.

"You're taking out your anger on our kids," Hephaestus spoke up.

"It isn't welcome," Aphrodite agreed with her husband.

"What they mean to say is...don't do it," Apollo threw in.

Zeus nodded, listening to them speak, but not entirely comprehending. He was too busy trying to process who or what had stolen his Master Bolt.

"No time to waste," Chiron said. "I think you should all get packing."

Megaera snapped the book shut. "That was the end of the book." She announced.

Artemis nodded. "I shall read next." The goddess held out her hand, and the book flew into it. She cleared her throat and began...I Ruin A Perfectly Good Bus

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Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! Hope you enjoy!

Also I have a question for you all. I have Nico and Thalia knowing a lot of pop culture, but would they actually? I mean she was a tree and then a huntress. Whereas Nico, has come from a different century and lives in the Underworld. Is them knowing this stuff unrealistic? Or should I have them make more references?
Chapter 12

It didn't take me long to pack. I decided to leave the Minotaur horn in my cabin,

"Interesting," Hercules commented. "Most people chose to carry around their spoils." He pulled his cloak closer to him.

Percy shrugged. "I'm not most people."

which left me only an extra change of clothes and a toothbrush to stuff in a backpack Grover had found for me.

"Good, its best to travel light." Hermes complimented.

The camp store loaned me one hundred dollars in mortal money

"I've always wondered, how does the camp earn money?" Jason asked.

"They sell the strawberries," Percy told him. Jason nodded.

and twenty golden drachmas.

"Golden?" The demigods of the past all exclaimed in shock.

"Yeah?" Nico asked warily.

"Why are they golden?" Perseus inquired.

"Well mortals no longer use drachmas. Drachmas are only to communicate through Iris-messages or for the gods." Thalia explained. The past demigods nodded still surprised.

These coins were as big as Girl Scout cookies and had images of various Greek gods stamped on one side and the Empire State Building on the other.

"Those are some big coins." Nico muttered remembering his own surprise when first encountering drachmas.

The ancient mortal drachmas had been silver, Chiron told us, but Olympians never used less than pure gold.

"Of course not." Hephaestus stared at the book.

Chiron said the coins might come in handy for non-mortal transactions,-whatever that meant.

"Iris-messages." Thalia and Nico said simultaneously.

"Hold on, I didn't notice before but Iris delivers messages for demigods too?" Dionysus asked. They nodded. The gods looked around surprised, times had definitely changed.

He gave Annabeth and me each a canteen of nectar and a Ziploc bag full of ambrosia squares, to be used only in emergencies, if we were seriously hurt. It was god food, Chiron reminded us.
"And the best food." Hermes said dreamily. "How do the mortals stand eating their plain food anyway?"

It would cure us of almost any injury, but it was lethal to mortals.

"Oh right." Hermes grinned sheepishly.

Too much of it would make a half-blood very, very feverish. An overdose would burn us up, literally.

"At least you get it at all." Theseus drawled, thinking about how useful ambrosia and nectar could be for the demigods now.

"You don't get it?" Percy asked. The past demigods shook their heads.

"We don't have it either." Jason muttered, feeling not for the first time, that the gods favored the Greeks more.

Annabeth was bringing her magic Yankees cap, which she told me had been a twelfth-birthday present from her mom. She carried a book on famous classical architecture, written in Ancient Greek, to read when she got bored, and a long bronze knife, hidden in her shirt sleeve. I was sure the knife would get us busted the first time we went through a metal detector.

Thalia laughed out loud. "The Mist remember?"

"No one explained all that to me Thalia!" Percy said defensively.

Grover wore his fake feet and his pants to pass as human. He wore a green rasta-style cap, because when it rained his curly hair flattened and you could just see the tips of his horns. His bright orange backpack was full of scrap metal and apples to snack on. In his pocket was a set of reed pipes his daddy goat had carved for him, even though he only knew two songs: Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 12 and Hilary Duff's "So Yesterday," both of which sounded pretty bad on reed pipes.

Thalia grimaced. "Goat boy has the worst choice in music."

"I've tried. It's hopeless." Percy shrugged.

We waved good-bye to the other campers, took one last look at the strawberry fields, the ocean, and the Big House, then hiked up Half-Blood Hill to the tall pine tree that used to be Thalia, daughter of Zeus.

"Thank you for the constant reminder Percy." Thalia rolled her eyes.

"I'm sorry okay? It was sort of on my mind a lot." Percy shot back.

Meanwhile Artemis had noticed Apollo flinch every time, Thalia was mentioned in tree form. Her guilt intensified at that, for blurting out Daphne's name like that. Her brother had truly loved the girl. But she had been truthful, he was a pig just like all the other men, playing with other girls. Artemis didn't know what to do.

Chiron was waiting for us in his wheelchair. Next to him stood the surfer dude I'd seen when I
was recovering in the sick room. According to Grover, the guy was the camp's head of security. He supposedly had eyes all over his body so he could never be surprised. Today, though, he was wearing a chauffeur's uniform, so I could only see extra peepers on his hands, face and neck.

Hera beamed at Argus' description. Ares leaned over to Hephaestus, "The goddess loves the freak more than her own children."

Hephaestus shot him an annoyed look, but agreed wholeheartedly.

"This is Argus," Chiron told me. "He will drive you into the city, and, er, well, keep an eye on things."

"Bad pun." The future demigods all called out.

I heard footsteps behind us.

Luke came running up the hill, carrying a pair of basketball shoes.

"Shoes?" Hermes asked curiously.

"Hey!" he panted. "Glad I caught you."

Thalia and Nico scowled at the words.

Annabeth blushed, the way she always did when Luke was around.

Jason blinked. "She really had a crush on him huh?"

Percy nodded. He briefly reflected that it should probably be weird for him knowing who his girlfriend used to like, but strangely it wasn't. That said a lot about his life.

"Just wanted to say good luck, " Luke told me. "And I thought...Um, maybe you could use these."

He handed me the sneakers, which looked pretty normal. They even smelled kind of normal.

"You smelled the shoes?" Triton said flatly. Percy blushed a bit and shrugged.

Luke said, "Maia!"

White bird's wings sprouted out of the heels, startling me so much, I dropped them. The shoes flapped around on the ground until the wings folded up and disappeared.

Grins in the throne room faded. "He brought you flying shoes?" Hades asked incredulously. "Well he was assisting you on your quest, considering the goal was to reach my realm." He joked.

There were several snickers at that, causing no one to notice Nico and Thalia gritting their teeth.

"Awesome!" Grover said.

Luke smiled. "Those served me well when I was on my quest. Gift from Dad. Of course, I don't use them much these days..." His expression turned sad.
Hermes brightened. "Oh, must've been a gift from me!"

"Sorry Her-Lord Hermes." Percy said when Hermes looked for confirmation. "We don't know, none of us were at camp at the time."

"Right." Hermes agreed.

I didn't know what to say. It was cool enough that Luke had come to say good-bye. I'd been afraid he might resent me for getting so much attention the last few days. But here he was giving me a magic gift...It made me blush almost as much as Annabeth.

Nico stared at the book in disbelief. Percy blushing because of Luke? The way Annabeth was?

"But for a different reason right?" Thalia blurted out what was on Nico's mind.

"Uh..." Percy stammered. There was dead silence in the way Thalia and Nico were staring at him. "I was young and impressionable! It didn't last like Annabeth's!"

"You liked the son of Hermes?" Poseidon asked his son.

Percy clenched his jaw. "Very, very briefly."

Nico was conflicted. He didn't know whether to gape in horror at the idea of Percy liking Luke, or to rejoice that there might be hope for himself and Per-...No. There was nothing to rejoice about, just horror.

"Hey, man," I said. "Thanks."

"Listen, Percy..." Luke looked uncomfortable. "A lot of hopes are riding on you. So just...Kill some monsters for me, okay?"

We shook hands. Luke patted Grover's head between his horns, then gave a good-bye hug to Annabeth, who looked like she might pass out.

Thalia finally spoke up. "I...I don't blame you Percy. Luke just had a...way about him. You can't help but fall."

"You too then?" Percy stated more than asked.

She nodded.

For the first time Jason and Nico made eye contact. Neither were sure what to make of the fact that not only Annabeth, but Percy and Thalia had also liked Luke in that way. It was harder for Nico, knowing about everything Luke put the three through, not even including his personal feelings on the matter.

After Luke was gone, I told her, "You're hyperventilating."

Aphrodite giggled, oblivious to the turmoil within the three Greek demigods. "Young love." She said giddily.

"Am not."

"You let him capture the flag instead of you, didn't you?"
Athena scowled at the thought of one of her children giving up honor and glory for love.

"So sweet!" Aphrodite squealed. "Are we sure she's Athena's daughter?"

Athena gave the goddess of doves a chilling look.

"Oh...Why do I want to go anywhere with you, Percy?"

"We've been asking the same thing, insolent child." Demeter said callously.

Aphrodite gazed at Demeter. "She really doesn't understand anything about when a maiden is in love for the first time, does she?"

"If she did, she would stop putting Hades and I through all this grief and accept our relationship." Persephone replied.

She stomped down the other side of the hill, where a white SUV waited on the shoulder of the road. Argus followed, jingling his car keys.

I picked up the flying shoes and had a sudden bad feeling. I looked at Chiron. "I won't be able to use these, will I?"

"You think?" Triton asked sarcastically.

"I was new to the not flying because Zeus hates my guts thing." Percy protested.

He shook his head. "Luke meant well, Percy. But taking to the air ... That would not be wise for you."

I nodded, disappointed, but then I got an idea. "Hey, Grover. You want a magic item?"

"You gave them to Grover?" Thalia laughed.

"Why not?"

Hermes smiled at Percy. "You are a true friend of the satyrs." Hermes announced solemnly.

"Uh thanks?"

His eyes lit up. "Me?"

Pretty soon we'd laced the sneakers over his fake feet, and the world's first flying goat boy was ready for launch.

"You make him sound like a rocket ship." Jason said staring at Percy in disbelief.

Percy only grinned back boyishly, but the haunted look in his eyes dimmed the effect. Jason could only wonder what the other boy had gone through for such an effect.

"Maia!" he shouted.

He got off the ground okay, but then fell over sideways so his backpack dragged through the grass. The winged shoes kept bucking up and down like tiny broncos.

Hermes grimaced. He shared a look with Dionysus who looked just as horrified.
"Grover is the only satyr to receive such a gift, yes?" Ariadne asked taking pity on her husband and wanting to give him some peace.

The demigods all nodded. Dionysus and Hermes both sighed in relief.

"Practice," Chiron called after him. "You just need practice!"

"Aaaaa!" Grover went flying sideways down the hill like a possessed lawn mower, heading toward the van.

The future demigods all burst out laughing. "I say Percy should be banned from watching all horror movies and cartoons. All in favor?" Jason asked amidst hysteria.

"Aye." Thalia and Nico both said with much difficulty. Percy groaned but smiled watching the three have fun. It was nice to know that, they were still able to do that.

Before I could follow, Chiron caught my arm. "I should have trained you better, Percy," he said. "If only I had more time. Hercules, Jason-they all got more training."

All eyes turned to Jason. They all knew about Hercules, but Chiron mentioning him was interesting.

"Oh!" Jason said startled to realize everyone was staring at him. "Chiron doesn't mean me, he means the original Jason. You know, Jason and the Argonauts?"

The other gods frowned in confusion as Hera bristled with anger.

"Jason, my champion," She informed them curtly.

"I remember," Theseus rolled his eyes. They weren't fans of the original Jason.

"That's okay. I just wish-"

I stopped myself because I was about to sound like a brat. I was wishing my dad had given me a cool magic item to help on the quest, something as good as Luke's flying shoes, or Annabeth's invisible cap.

"You sound worse than a brat." Zoë informed him.

"Thanks." Percy replied dryly. Percy figured she had only recently become a Hunter, since her hatred of males was so strong.

"What am I thinking?" Chiron cried. "I can't let you get away without this."

He pulled a pen from his coat pocket and handed it to me. It was an ordinary disposable ballpoint, black ink, removable cap. Probably cost thirty cents.


"Gee," I said. "Thanks."

"Percy, that's a gift from your father. I've kept it for years, not knowing you were who I was waiting for. But the prophecy is clear to me now. You are the one."

"You're the one for so many people, you heartbreaker." Aphrodite teased slyly.
I remembered the field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when I'd vaporized Mrs. Dodds. Chiron had thrown me a pen that turned into a sword. Could this be...?

"That's cool." Jason admitted grudgingly. "But my sword used to become a coin." he added. Percy remained silent, knowing the details of his sword would most probably be revealed.

I took off the cap, and the pen grew longer and heavier in my hand. In half a second, I held a shimmering bronze sword with a double-edged blade, a leather-wrapped grip, and a flat hilt riveted with gold studs. It was the first weapon that actually felt balanced in my hand.

"That sword was made for you or something." Nico agreed.

"No." Percy denied. "It was made for someone else, but it ended up with me. And I am honored to have it."

"The sword has a long and tragic history that we need not go into," Chiron told me. "Its name is Anaklusmos."

Artemis paused, glancing at Zoë, the young Huntress recalling Percy's earlier words.

Zoë glanced at him and he gave her a slight nod. Her eyes widened, as Zoë wondered how Percy would come to know about her life story.

"Riptide," I translated, surprised the Ancient Greek came so easily.

Hercules bowed his head. The sword's existence was why Zoë truly hated him. He had cost her, her life in more ways than one. He was thankful that she had found Artemis after all that.

"Use it only for emergencies," Chiron said, "and only against monsters. No hero should harm mortals unless absolutely necessary, of course, but this sword wouldn't harm them in any case."

"Thank the gods." Percy agreed.

"Who?" Amphitrite demanded.

Percy hesitated. "A friend. She'll come in later on in the books, I'm pretty sure."

Rachel. Thalia and Nico both realized that she was the mortal Percy was talking about. Neither could wait to hear the full story.

I looked at the wickedly sharp blade. "What do you mean it wouldn't harm mortals? How could it not?"

"The sword is celestial bronze. Forged by the Cyclopes, tempered in the heart of Mount Etna, cooled in the River Lethe. It's deadly to monsters, to any creature from the Underworld, provided they don't kill you first. But the blade will pass through mortals like an illusion. They simply are not important enough for the blade to kill. And I should warn you: as a demigod, you can be killed by either celestial or normal weapons. You are twice as vulnerable."

"Thanks for the information, Chiron." Perseus spoke up, sounding faint.

"It'll keep him vigilant." Nico shrugged.
"Rachel would love to know she's not important enough to be killed."

"She'd take that as an insult." Percy rolled his eyes.

Apollo narrowed his eyes. "Who is Rachel?" His voice conveyed that he wasn't in the mood for games. He needed to know.

The future demigods shared looks coming to a decision. "We can't tell you exactly who she is, but we will say that she is a very important mortal in the lives of everyone at camp." Thalia said diplomatically.

Apollo smiled slowly. "The Oracle." He spoke in their minds. They all froze and stared at him, giving him all the confirmation he needed.

"Good to know."

"Now recap the pen."

I touched the pen cap to the sword tip and instantly Riptide shrunk to a ballpoint pen again. I tucked it in my pocket, a little nervous, because I was famous for losing pens at school.

"You can't lose that pen boy." Zoë sneered.

"You can't," Chiron said.

"Can't what?"

"Lose the pen," he said. "It is enchanted. It will always reappear in your pocket. Try it."

"Thank the gods for that," Percy said. "Riptide has saved my life more times than I can count. Its the one weapon I can never give away."

Zoë glared at him, but thankful that the sword that was once her immortality was cherished. Even if it was by the scum of the earth, a boy.

I was wary, but I threw the pen as far as I could down the hill and watched it disappear in the grass.

"It may take a few moments," Chiron told me. "Now check your pocket."

Sure enough, the pen was there.

"That's a pretty handy weapon," Ares agreed.

"Okay, that's extremely cool," I admitted. "But what if a mortal sees me pulling out a sword?"

"We just went over this." Thalia deadpanned.

"Yeah, us, Not Past Percy." Theseus reminded.

"Past Percy?" Orion looked at him strangely.

"Well we are reading about Percy's past, so I thought it worked." Theseus blushed.
Chiron smiled. "Mist is a powerful thing, Percy."

"Mist?"

"Yes. Read The Iliad."

"The Iliad?" Athena spoke up.

"Yeah. By Homer." Percy told her.

"Who?"

"Not born yet."

It's full of references to the stuff. Whenever divine or monstrous elements mix with the mortal world, they generate Mist, which obscures the vision of humans. You will see things just as they are, being a half-blood, but humans will interpret things quite differently. Remarkable, really, the lengths to which humans will go to fit things into their version of reality."

"That doesn't happen now." Hercules countered.

"Civilization moved on. The mortals have more power now, they don't spend their lives dedicating themselves to the gods."

"Mortals? And power? Without us?" Ares laughed.

"It's true." Jason put in.

The gods were all disturbed at the thought of such a world. Mortals doing whatever they wanted, without putting them first? What good was that?

I put Riptide back in my pocket.

For the first time, the quest felt real. I was actually leaving Half-Blood Hill. I was heading west with no adult supervision, no backup plan, not even a cell phone.

"That's odd?" All of the demigods asked simultaneously.

"Yes." Percy insisted. "Maybe not for demigods, but normal children, yes."

(Chiron said cell phones were traceable by monsters; if we used one, it would be worse than sending up a flare.) I had no weapon stronger than a sword to fight off monsters and reach the Land of the Dead.

"It's all you need." Hercules reassured Percy.

The raven-haired boy just shook his head. "That quest was a little doomed from the start."

"Aren't all quests?" Jason asked. Percy nodded.

"Chiron..." I said. "When you say the gods are immortal...I mean, there was a time before them, right?"

"Funny you should ask." Thalia whispered in Percy's ear.
"Four ages before them, actually. The Time of the Titans was the Fourth Age, sometimes called the Golden Age, which is definitely a misnomer. This, the time of Western civilization and the rule of Zeus, is the Fifth Age."

The gods all scowled. They hated remembering there had been others before them. On the bright side, they were the ones that would last forever.

"So what was it like...Before the gods?"

"As if anyone cares." Hera rolled her eyes. Those times had been exceptionally dark.

Chiron pursed his lips. "Even I am not old enough to remember that, child, but I know it was a time of darkness and savagery for mortals. Kronos, the lord of the Titans, called his reign the Golden Age because men lived innocent and free of all knowledge.

"That hindered mankind rather than helped." Athena snapped.

But that was mere propaganda. The Titan king cared nothing for your kind except as appetizers or a source of cheap entertainment.

"He ate mortals?" Thalia asked horrified. Luke and so many demigods had been with him.

"He ate his children." Hades pointed out.

It was only in the early reign of Lord Zeus, when Prometheus the good Titan brought fire to mankind, that your species began to progress, and even then Prometheus was branded a radical thinker. Zeus punished him severely, as you may recall. Of course, eventually the gods warmed to humans, and Western civilization was born."

"Zeus warms up to humans now, all the time." Hera murmured, causing Zeus to flinch at the resigned tone in his wife's voice.

"But the gods can't die now, right? I mean, as long as Western civilization is alive, they're alive. So...Even if I failed, nothing could happen so bad it would mess up everything, right?"

"Thinking about failure without even trying is usually a sign." Alecto crackled. One could tell she was angry about her future death. Percy merely stared back at her impassively. Alecto was impressed, the demigod was certainly brave.

Chiron gave me a melancholy smile. "No one knows how long the Age of the West will last, Percy. The gods are immortal, yes. But then, so were the Titans. They still exist, locked away in their various prisons, forced to endure endless pain and punishment, reduced in power, but still very much alive. May the Fates forbid that the gods should ever suffer such a doom, or that we should ever return to the darkness and chaos of the past. All we can do, child, is follow our destiny."

"That was cliché. Even for Chiron." Thalia said firmly. "No protesting. You know I'm right."
"Our destiny...Assuming we know what that is."

"I do." Apollo leaned back, at ease knowing that his Oracle would be back to normal.

"Of course you do." Artemis rolled her eyes peering over the book. Instantly Apollo's good mood vanished remembering the events out in the hall. Hermes shot Apollo a sympathetic look and Artemis continued.

"Relax," Chiron told me. "Keep a clear head. And remember, you may be about to prevent the biggest war in human history."

"No pressure?" Orion gaped at Chiron.

"No tact. That centaur needs tact." Jason winced remembering his own encounter with Chiron.

"Relax," I said. "I'm very relaxed."

When I got to the bottom of the hill, I looked back. Under the pine tree that used to be Thalia, daughter of Zeus,

Thalia and Jason both glared at Percy who put his hands up. Jason sighed, he really didn't like hearing about his sister being a tree.

In the meantime, Hermes had squeezed Apollo's hand and given him mental reassurances. Aphrodite even apologized again to Apollo, for Eros hurting him so much. Love wasn't a game, not when you were immortal and knew you'd be alone for a long time.

Chiron was now standing in full horse-man form, holding his bow high in salute. Just your typical summer camp send-off by your typical centaur.

"The centaur makes it a bit abnormal for most." Nico raised an eyebrow.

Argus drove us out of the countryside and into western Long Island. It felt weird to be on a highway again, Annabeth and Grover sitting next to me as if we were normal carpoolers.

After two weeks at Half-Blood Hill, the real world seemed like a fantasy. I found myself staring at every McDonald's, every kid in the back of his parents' car, every billboard and shopping mall.

"I know what you mean." Thalia and Nico said wistfully. Jason remained silent, since New Rome was basically their real world, not that demigods from Camp Jupiter left camp anyway. Besides he had arrived there when he was three years old, that was his real world.

"So far so good," I told Annabeth. "Ten miles and not a single monster."

"You like to test your luck huh?" Hercules asked.

Percy shrugged.

She gave me an irritated look. "It's bad luck to talk that way, seaweed brain."

"Seaweed brain?" Triton said disdainfully. He shot Athena a cold look.

"Remind me again-why do you hate me so much?"
"Well there's a whole list of reasons, but of course, they are going to be incredibly unbelievable." Triton smiled sarcastically. He looked right at Percy, who reluctantly nodded.

"I don't hate you."

"Good because she doesn't have a right to." Theseus muttered. Triton gave him a curious look.

"Could've fooled me."

She folded her cap of invisibility. "Look...We're just not supposed to get along, okay? Our parents are rivals."

"Most idiotic reason I've ever heard. Her mother's battles with another god have nothing to do with her!" Demeter spat.

"Demeter," Athena began, Demeter cut her off.

"No. Hephaestus and Ares fight but say Eros doesn't have problems with Eupheme. This argument is ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Good question." Hestia commented. She had never understood why Athena insisted on holding on to things done long in the past.

She sighed. "How many reasons do you want? One time my mom caught Poseidon with his girlfriend in Athena's temple, which is hugely disrespectful.

"Medusa." Amphitrite hissed. Poseidon grabbed her hand in apology.

Perseus flinched remembering his fight with the monster, while Percy and Nico exchanged a look.

Another time, Athena and Poseidon competed to be the patron god for the city of Athens. Your dad created some stupid saltwater spring for his gift.

"It wasn't stupid. If they had modern technology they could've used it for so many things." Jason pointed out. "Electricity, water supply for crops and drinking, natural supply of sodium, the list goes on."

"That's the point. The Ancient Greeks weren't able to realize the usefulness of their gift. If they had expanded their horizons they would've seen the benefits of such a spring. People in our time would kill for a spring like that." Thalia said.

"How do you know that?" Ariadne asked, even Daedalus had never thought of anything like that.

"Grover. He's an environmentalist." Percy answered. When Ariadne gave him a blank look, he clarified, "Grover cares a lot about the wild."

"I see." Ariadne nodded.

My mom created the olive tree. The people saw that her gift was better, so they named the city after her."

"Again their ignorance is what it really was." Jason said, thinking about how the Romans would have recognized the gift's benefits.
Athena looked murderous and it was only a look from Zeus that had her under control.

"They must really like olives."

"Oh, forget it."

"Now, if she'd invented pizza-that I could understand."

"I want pizza." Jason and Percy said simultaneously.

"Match made in heaven." Thalia said sarcastically waving a hand at the duo.

"Nah, we've come way too close to killing each other for that." Jason denied.

"You think the two of us are bad? Jason and I are worse." Percy said mischievously.

"I said, forget it!"

Hestia smiled at Poseidon. He didn't show it, but she knew he was interested in the boy. The one named after Zeus' son. Very interested. Not just him either, Triton and Amphitrite were interested in his demigod children in a good way which had never occurred before.

**In the front seat, Argus smiled. He didn't say anything, but one blue eye on the back of his neck winked at me.**

"Argus sees all. Argus knows all." Hera smiled. Apollo rolled his eyes at the demigods.

Traffic slowed us down in Queens. By the time we got into Manhattan it was sunset and starting to rain.

Argus dropped us at the Greyhound Station on the Upper East Side, not far from my mom and Gabe's apartment. Taped to a mailbox was a soggy flyer with my picture on it: HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BOY?

The smiles faded.

"Was this?" Nico asked angrily.

"Smelly Gabe?" Percy asked back. "You bet."

Nico and Thalia both glared at the reminder of Percy's ex-stepfather.

**I ripped it down before Annabeth and Grover could notice.**

"Did it work?" Perseus asked. Percy shrugged at his namesake.

Argus unloaded our bags, made sure we got our bus tickets, then drove away, the eye on the back of his hand opening to watch us as he pulled out of the parking lot.

Hera looked at her fellow Olympians triumphantly. They all reluctantly nodded back in gratitude. They had to admit that despite being Hera's creation out of jealousy, he was a very good guardian for their children. So good, he was made immortal apparently.

I thought about how close I was to my old apartment. On a normal day, my mom would be home from the candy store by now. Smelly Gabe was probably up there right now, playing
poker, not even missing her.

"He doesn't deserve her." Thalia bit out.

"No man deserves any woman. If she hadn't been with Poseidon, I would have extended an invitation to the Hunters to her." Artemis replied.

Percy grimaced. "You have a problem with that boy?" Artemis asked sharply.

"Yeah." Percy said bluntly. "First of all, my mom would have never left her dying uncle. Second, she'd be in constant danger."

"You fool." Zoë said. "You'd never be born if she were a Huntress."

"So?" Percy asked genuinely confused.

"We'd be doomed." Jason told him. Percy was about to protest when Nico and Thalia both agreed with Jason. He stopped his face turning a bright red.

Artemis and Zoë watched in surprise.

Grover shouldered his backpack. He gazed down the street in the direction I was looking. "You want to know why she married him, Percy?"

"Yes." Thalia and Nico snapped.

I stared at him. "Were you reading my mind or something?"

"Satyrs can't do that. Gods on the other hand, they can definitely do that." Theseus told him.

Percy raised a brow. Theseus blushed. "And you already know that. Right."

"Just your emotions." He shrugged. "Guess I forgot to tell you satyrs can do that. You were thinking about your mom and your stepdad, right?"

I nodded, wondering what else Grover might've forgotten to tell me.

There was a burst of laughter at that.

"Your mom married Gabe for you," Grover told me. "You call him 'Smelly,' but you've got no idea. The guy has this aura...Yuck. I can smell him from here. I can smell traces of him on you, and you haven't been near him for a week."

Thalia got it first. She stared at Percy. "Your mom really loves you."

Percy nodded. "And I love her back."

Demeter and Hera stared at each other wishing they could have that sort of love from their children.

"Thanks," I said. "Where's the nearest shower?"

Laughter echoed in the throne room.

"Nice one." Hermes complimented.

"Thanks."
"You should be grateful, Percy. Your stepfather smells so repulsively human he could mask the presence of any demigod.

Nico's eyes widened. "You mean?"

"Mean what?" Jason asked obliviously.

"You'll see," Nico waved him off.

As soon as I took a whiff inside his Camaro, I knew: Gabe has been covering your scent for years. If you hadn't lived with him every summer, you probably would've been found by monsters a long time ago. Your mom stayed with him to protect you. She was a smart lady. She must've loved you a lot to put up with that guy-if that makes you feel any better."

"It wouldn't make me feel better." Thalia said.

"Agreed." Nico said.

"For your moms?" Jason asked carefully.

Nico paused. "Yeah."

Thalia snorted. "As if. No. I meant for Sally."

Jason nodded, wondering silently why his sister hated their mother so much.

It didn't, but I forced myself not to show it. I'll see her again, I thought. She isn't gone.

Hades groaned. "Stay out of the Underworld."

"No can do, Uncle. The Underworld is my favourite place to be." Percy said cheekily.

Nico glanced at him. Percy hated the Underworld.

I wondered if Grover could still read my emotions, mixed up as they were. I was glad he and Annabeth were with me, but I felt guilty that I hadn't been straight with them. I hadn't told them the real reason I'd said yes to this crazy quest.

"The real reason?" Triton stared at Percy. He waved a hand at the book.

The truth was, I didn't care about retrieving Zeus's lightning bolt,

"Excuse me?!" Zeus glared furiously.

"Why would he? You're threatening a war and more specifically his murder." Dionysus drawled.

"So?" Zeus demanded.

"Mortals are touchy about that." Aphrodite hummed, combing her hair.

or saving the world,

"The world is screwed then." Jason said mildly.

"Saving the world was an after thought for me." Percy grinned.
"The world is offended." Orion joked.

or even helping my father out of trouble.

It took everything, everyone had to not look at Poseidon right then.

The more I thought about it, I resented Poseidon for never visiting me, never helping my mom, never even sending a lousy child-support check. He'd only claimed me because he needed a job done.

"Welcome to being a demigod." Hercules said dryly.

"No kidding."

All I cared about was my mom. Hades had taken her unfairly, and Hades was going to give her back.

"Confident." Tisiphone smirked. "No one has managed that. Not even Orpheus."

"Yeah. But eventually it will happen. Especially if Thanatos gets a little tied up." Percy replied much to the shock of the others in the room.

You will be betrayed by one who calls you a friend, the Oracle whispered in my mind. You will fail to save what matters most in the end.

Shut up, I told it.

A few people cracked a smile and snorted at the thought of Percy talking to a mummy.

Three.

Two.

One.

They all went into hysterics.

"Haha very funny guys." Percy sounded annoyed.

"You know, talking to voices in your head usually leads to madness. Would you like some help advancing that?" Dionysus snickered.

The rain kept coming down.

Several glances at Zeus.

We got restless waiting for the bus and decided to play some Hacky Sack with one of Grover's apples. Annabeth was unbelievable. She could bounce the apple off her knee, her elbow, her shoulder, whatever. I wasn't too bad myself.

Artemis and Zoë were going into shock over a boy complimenting a girl at doing something better than them, and then they rolled their eyes. The male ego would always stay right there.

The game ended when I tossed the apple toward Grover and it got too close to his mouth. In one mega goat bite, our Hacky Sack disappeared-core, stem, and all.
"It was an apple you were using. Its like you were asking for it." Jason rolled his eyes, memories of fauns asking him for money coming back to him.

"Who cares? Its still hilarious." Thalia bumped her brother's shoulder lightly with her own.

**Grover blushed. He tried to apologize, but Annabeth and I were too busy cracking up.**

Finally the bus came. As we stood in line to board, Grover started looking around, sniffing the air like he smelled his favorite school cafeteria delicacy-enchiladas.

"Yeah...Not so favourite after all. More like least favourite."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said tensely. "Maybe it's nothing."

"He should stop doubting himself. It'll really hinder you all in the long run." Hestia fretted.

"Don't worry. Grover's become much more confident now."

**But I could tell it wasn't nothing. I started looking over my shoulder, too.**

"Good observation skills." Theseus praised.

"Yeah." Orion jumped in. "Especially based on how monsters seem to actively search for demigods. A hunter needs to be able to pay attention to his surroundings and follow his gut. Seems like you got both under control."

"Not really. He doesn't follow his gut most times." Thalia countered.

"Oh. Work on it then."

I was relieved when we finally got on board and found seats together in the back of the bus. We stowed our back-packs. Annabeth kept slapping her Yankees cap nervously against her thigh.

As the last passengers got on, Annabeth clamped her hand onto my knee. "Percy."

An old lady had just boarded the bus. She wore a crumpled velvet dress, lace gloves, and a shapeless orange-knit hat that shadowed her face, and she carried a big paisley purse.

Aphrodite made a face. "She sounds hideous."

Nico gave Percy a questioning glance, to which he simply nodded.

When she tilted her head up, her black eyes glittered, and my heart skipped a beat.

"You fell in love with a grandma?" Ares asked.

"What?" Percy sounded scandalized.

"Hearts only skip beats in battle or in love. Doubt you were about to attack a little, old lady."

Percy inwardly laughed at the irony in that statement.
It was Mrs. Dodds.

There was a pause of understanding as Alecto smiled creepily.

**Older, more withered, but definitely the same evil face.**

I scrunched down in my seat.

Alecto beamed with pride. The boy may have killed her but she terrified him. Her smile dimmed a little. She didn't like that the terror seemed to be past tense.

**Behind her came two more old ladies: one in a green hat, one in a purple hat. Otherwise they looked exactly like Mrs. Dodds-same gnarled hands, paisley handbags, wrinkled velvet dresses. Triplet demon grandmothers.**

"All three? You better not kill them. I hate it when the Furies are killed." Hades complained. "Too much work goes into ensuring they reform and get out of Tartarus as quickly as possible."

They sat in the front row, right behind the driver. The two on the aisle crossed their legs over the walkway, making an X. It was casual enough, but it sent a clear message: nobody leaves.

The Fury trio cackled enjoying their scene in the book. The non-Underworld dwellers all cringed at the sound.

The bus pulled out of the station, and we headed through the slick streets of Manhattan. "She didn't stay dead long," I said, trying to keep my voice from quivering. "I thought you said they could be dispelled for a lifetime."

"Not the Furies." Nico rolled his eyes. "They're D-Lord Hades' monster servants." He glanced at the Furies, "no offense. Hades would bring them back as soon as they got themselves killed."

"I said if you're lucky," Annabeth said. "You're obviously not."

"Like Nico just said, nothing to do with luck." Persephone rolled her eyes.

"Uh...she can't hear you." Jason said tentatively when the gods appeared to expect an apology for making them explain things more than once.

"Right." The gods made faces.

"All three of them," Grover whimpered. "Di immortales!"


"No problem?" Megaera screeched. "We're no problem?"

"No. That's code for you were a major problem and we thought were going to die." Percy clarified quickly.

**No problem. We'll just slip out the windows.**

"Probably don't open." Ares muttered.
"They don't open," Grover moaned.

"A back exit?" she suggested.

"Won't exist." Zoë claimed.

There wasn't one. Even if there had been, it wouldn't have helped. By that time, we were on Ninth Avenue, heading for the Lincoln Tunnel.

"They won't attack us with witnesses around," I said. "Will they?"

"Definitely." Hercules threw in. "They won't care."

"Mortals don't have good eyes," Annabeth reminded me. "Their brains can only process what they see through the Mist."

"Will you all stop?" Artemis hissed, putting the book away from her face.

Zoë immediately apologized as did Hercules hesitantly. Ares just rolled his eyes, ignoring Artemis.

"They'll see three old ladies killing us, won't they?"

"More like the other way around." Thalia said after a moment.

She thought about it. "Hard to say. But we can't count on mortals for help. Maybe an emergency exit in the roof...?"

"How would you get up there?" Demeter threw back her braided hay-like hair.

We hit the Lincoln Tunnel, and the bus went dark except for the running lights down the aisle. It was eerily quiet without the sound of the rain.

"Out of sight. Worst place for you all to be." Hades observed.

Tisiphone frowned. "I don't understand why all three of us should care about him. Or that he's still alive after all three of us attacked."

"Long story?" Percy offered.

"Probably went after him due to him unfairly accusing me." Hades answered.

"Sorry!"

Mrs. Dodds got up. In a flat voice, as if she'd rehearsed it, she announced to the whole bus: "I need to use the restroom."

"So do I," said the second sister.

"So do I," said the third sister.

"Lame excuse," Jason said.

Alecto and Megaera peered at him.

"Never mind."
They all started coming down the aisle.

"I've got it," Annabeth said. "Percy, take my hat."

"We can sense invisibility, it won't work." Megaera claimed.

"It may. Sort of." Alecto murmured.

"Sort of?!!"

"Nope it'll definitely work." Hades broke in.

"What?"

"You're the one they want. Turn invisible and go up the aisle. Let them pass you. Maybe you can get to the front and get away."

"Makes sense. They're looking for you and if you aren't there, the Kindly Ones will leave." Theseus reasoned.

"Sounds more like the idea of a coward to me." Dionysus jibed.

"But you guys-"

"There's an outside chance they might not notice us," Annabeth said. "You're a son of one of the Big Three. Your smell might be overpowering."

"Her way of saying you stink." Apollo tried to joke.

The blank looks he received were the answer to his bad attempt at humor.

"I can't just leave you."

"Don't worry about us," Grover said. "Go!"

My hands trembled. I felt like a coward, but I took the Yankees cap and put it on.

"Aww, at least you admit it was selfish of you to leave them behind. Unlike some people." Dionysus quipped. Ariadne hit him lightly on the arm as a warning. She was tired of this, all she wanted was to forget it ever happened. But Dionysus holding a grudge definitely wasn't helping.

When I looked down, my body wasn't there anymore.

"That's sort of the point. You're invisible." Athena said bluntly, her tone mocking.

I started creeping up the aisle. I managed to get up ten rows, then duck into an empty seat just as the Furies walked past.

The Furies glared at Percy who simply gave a shrug.

Mrs. Dodds stopped, sniffing, and looked straight at me. My heart was pounding.

Apparently she didn't see anything. She and her sisters kept going.

Alecto groaned. "Stop calling me Mrs. Dodds. I can't believe we let you escape."
"Um. I can't. This is in the book, and you'll always be Mrs. Dodds to me. Sorry." Percy definitely
didn't sound sorry.

I was free. I made it to the front of the bus. We were almost through the Lincoln Tunnel now.
I was about to press the emergency stop button when I heard hideous wailing from the back
row.

"The stop button?" Dionysus asked confused.

"Um yeah? Why? You didn't think I'd just leave them there for good did you?"

Silence.

"I would never!"

"We know Perce."

"Yeah, but you're my friends. Of course you know."

"Touché."

The old ladies were not old ladies anymore. Their faces were still the same-I guess those
couldn't get any uglier-

The trio's faces contorted as they swiveled to stare at Percy.

He had paled. "I'm sorry Kindly Ones. I think you're all very beautiful actually. That was my
uh...oblivious twelve year old self." Percy scoffed. "What did he know about beauty?"

The Furies' eyes had narrowed but they were nodding buying into his words. Percy sighed in relief
as Nico laughed at him.

but their bodies had shriveled into leathery brown hag bodies with bat's wings and hands and
feet like gargoyle claws. Their handbags had turned into fiery whips.

The Furies surrounded Grover and Annabeth, lashing their whips, hissing: "Where is it?
Where?"

"It?" Hera caught.

Hades' face paled. "The master bolt?"

Zeus pointed at his elder brother. "SO YOU DID STEAL IT?"

"Wha-no! Why would I even want to?" Hades' face grew red.

"What else would your Furies be looking for?"

"STOP IT! Arguing about the future is pointless. How many times must I remind you all? Sit down
and read to find out." Hestia snapped, her body engulfed in flames.

The other people on the bus were screaming, cowering in their seats. They saw something, all
right.

"The Mist isn't perfect. It can make mistakes too." Thalia defended.
"The Mist isn't a living thing."

"I know that!"

"He's not here!" Annabeth yelled. "He's gone!"

The Furies raised their whips.

Annabeth drew her bronze knife. Grover grabbed a tin can from his snack bag and prepared to throw it.

"Neither if which will work against a whip." Tisiphone clapped her hands together happily, like a little girl.

"She is Punishment." Hades shrugged when he saw the others were gaping unattractively.

What I did next was so impulsive and dangerous I should've been named ADHD poster child of the year.

"Not just that year. Every year." Jason said seriously. "I've heard the stories."

Percy just laughed.

The bus driver was distracted, trying to see what was going on in his rearview mirror.

Still invisible, I grabbed the wheel from him and jerked it to the left. Everybody howled as they were thrown to the right, and I heard what I hoped was the sound of three Furies smashing against the windows.

"Ow." Several mouthed while the Furies grew meek.

"Mortal contraptions sound deadly." Demeter worried.

"They can be. But no more than a shovel." Thalia answered.

"Shovel?"

"For digging. Mostly used to grow crops."

Demeter's eyes gleamed with interest.

"Hey!" the driver yelled. "Hey-whoa!"

We wrestled for the wheel. The bus slammed against the side of the tunnel, grinding metal, throwing sparks a mile behind us.

"Were you alright?" Theseus grimaced.

"Peachy."

We careened out of the Lincoln Tunnel and back into the rainstorm, people and monsters tossed around the bus, cars plowed aside like bowling pins.

Somehow the driver found an exit. We shot off the highway, through half a dozen traffic lights, and ended up barreling down one of those New Jersey rural roads where you can't
believe there's so much nothing right across the river from New York. There were woods to our left, the Hudson River to our right, and the driver seemed to be veering toward the river.

"Not too bad. The river would strengthen you." Amphitrite said softly.

"Yes, but I didn't know that at the time. Not to mention all those people would have been in danger."

Several of the gods looked at Percy curiously. He was proving to be quite different from other heroes.

Another great idea: I hit the emergency brake.

"You think?" Jason said sarcastically.

The bus wailed, spun a full circle on the wet asphalt, and crashed into the trees. The emergency lights came on. The door flew open. The bus driver was the first one out,

"Whatever happened to professionalism?" Nico asked in disgust.

"Well he probably thought his bus had gotten hijacked by a ghost which in reality was just the Furies and an invisible Percy. I don't blame the driver." Thalia shrugged.

the passengers yelling as they stampeded after him. I stepped into the driver's seat and let them pass.

The Furies regained their balance. They lashed their whips at Annabeth while she waved her knife and yelled in Ancient Greek, telling them to back off. Grover threw tin cans.

"That is...tame." Tisiphone said bemused.

"We aren't even trying." Alecto scoffed in disgust. Hades patted their wings gently as if to comfort them.

I looked at the open doorway. I was free to go, but I couldn't leave my friends. I took off the invisible cap. "Hey!"

Zoë gave a start having fully expected Percy to leave his friends at the mercy of the Kindly Ones. She felt his gaze on her and met it head on. He looked away quickly leaving Zoë to wonder about her own thoughts on the male race.

The Furies turned, baring their yellow fangs at me, and the exit suddenly seemed like an excellent idea. Mrs. Dodds stalked up the aisle, just as she used to do in class, about to deliver my F- math test. Every time she flicked her whip, red flames danced along the barbed leather.

"Tame or not, still pretty scary." Orion said seriously keeping an eye on the Furies.

The trio just cackled in glee.

Her two ugly sisters hopped on top of the seats on either side of her and crawled toward me like huge nasty lizards.

Megaera and Tisiphone's smiles dropped. "Lizards?" They hissed.

"Perseus Jackson," Mrs. Dodds said, in an accent that was definitely from somewhere farther
south than Georgia. "You have offended the gods. You shall die."

"Do I get to kill you? Even a little?"

"I never understood. How do you kill anyone a little?" Percy asked shaking his head.

"By injuring them to the point of the death, but not enough that their soul leaves their body." Alecto answered.

"I liked you better as a math teacher," I told her.

"I don't." Nico whispered in the future Greek's ears. They snickered softly.

She growled.

Annabeth and Grover moved up behind the Furies cautiously, looking for an opening.

"Won't find one. We're too good." Megaera gloated, but stopped immediately when Hades cleared his throat.

I took the ballpoint pen out of my pocket and uncapped it. Riptide elongated into a shimmering double-edged sword.

At the mention of the sword Zoë stiffened. She had to stop doing that in order to read the book. She took in a deep breath and tried to forget why she even cared about Riptide.

The Furies hesitated.

Mrs. Dodds had felt Riptide's blade before. She obviously didn't like seeing it again.

"No way. I figured she'd love to see it again." Thalia said incredulously.

"You can stop mocking my thoughts at anytime." Percy returned tiredly.

"Submit now," she hissed. "And you will not suffer eternal torment."

"Nice try," I told her.

"He's not wrong. If the Furies have been sent after someone no matter what happens they will suffer eternal torment." Persephone revealed casually.

"That wasn't what I meant." Percy deadpanned.

"Percy, look out!" Annabeth cried.

Mrs. Dodds lashed her whip around my sword hand while the Furies on the either side lunged at me.

The entire throne room seemed to hold its breath. The Furies always got who they were after. The only question in their minds was how Percy was even alive.

My hand felt like it was wrapped in molten lead, but I managed not to drop Riptide. I stuck the Fury on the left with its hilt, sending her toppling backward into a seat. I turned and sliced the Fury on the right. As soon as the blade connected with her neck, she screamed and exploded into dust. Annabeth got Mrs. Dodds in a wrestler's hold and yanked her backward
while Grover ripped the whip out of her hands.

"Ow!" he yelled. "Ow! Hot! Hot!"

The Fury I'd hilt-slammed came at me again, talons ready, but I swung Riptide and she broke open like a piñata.

Megaera and Tisiphone stared at Percy. "You were twelve then?" Tisiphone demanded.

"Yeah?"

Megaera's eye twitched. "Just forget this ever happened. All of you."

Mrs. Dodds was trying to get Annabeth off her back. She kicked, clawed, hissed and bit, but Annabeth held on while Grover got Mrs. Dodds's legs tied up in her own whip. Finally they both shoved her backward into the aisle. Mrs. Dodds tried to get up, but she didn't have room to flap her bat wings, so she kept falling down.

Alecto took in deep breaths swallowing her anger. This puny demigod had defeated her twice now.

"Zeus will destroy you!" she promised. "Hades will have your soul!"

Hades groaned. "I thought I told you not to kill them."

"It's not like my past self can hear you." Percy protested.

"Braccas meas vescimini!" I yelled.

"What language is that?" Athena asked. "Something you made up?" The taunt quickly followed.

"It's the most impressive and ancient language in the world. And I'm surprised you knew how to use it." Jason at first rolled his eyes, then impressed turned to Percy who shrugged.

I wasn't sure where the Latin came from. I think it meant "Eat my pants!"

"It does." Jason confirmed.

"Latin just comes to me." Percy shrugged.

"No kidding." Jason agreed.

Thunder shook the bus. The hair rose on the back of my neck.

"It's like you're forever getting blasted with lightning." Thalia shook her head.

"No thanks to you."

"Get out!" Annabeth yelled at me. "Now!" I didn't need any encouragement.

"You better not have.' Nico grumbled causing Percy to grin.

We rushed outside and found the other passengers wandering around in a daze, arguing with the driver, or running around in circles yelling, "We're going to die!" A Hawaiian-shirted tourist with a camera snapped my photograph before I could recap my sword.
Nico, Thalia and Jason all groaned. "Way to make things worse for you."

"I know."

"You're seriously unlucky."

"I know."

"It's like the gods are out to get you."

"I know."

"Our bags!" Grover realized. "We left our-"

"No supplies." Theseus realized. Percy nodded his confirmation.

BOOOOOOM!

The windows of the bus exploded as the passengers ran for cover. Lightning shredded a huge crater in the roof, but an angry wail from inside told me Mrs. Dodds was not yet dead.

"That wouldn't kill me." Alecto agreed her eyes burning with hate. She had forgotten her Lord was friends with the sea brat, all Alecto knew was that the boy had killed her and her sisters.

"Run!" Annabeth said. "She's calling for reinforcements! We have to get out of here!"

We plunged into the woods as the rain poured down, the bus in flames behind us, and nothing but darkness ahead.

Artemis softly closed the book. "That's it."

"Well? Hurry up and someone read the next chapter!" Zeus insisted.

Hera smiled. "If you want to find out what happens next so badly how about you read the next chapter husband?"

Zeus gaped for a moment then nodded. "Fine, wife." Artemis stood and walked over to him to hand him the book. As soon as she had sat back down Zeus took in a breath and began...We Visit the Garden Gnome Emporium.
In a way, it's nice to know there are Greek gods out there,

"Thank you." Several gods said mightily. Their presence was much needed for the mortals after all. Percy winced waiting for what was next.

because you have somebody to blame when things go wrong.

Zeus pushed the book away from himself. "Excuse me?!"

Hera glared angrily at her husband. "Zeus. You are to only read the book understand? No input of your own until the next chapter!"

Zeus grit his teeth, but accepted her challenge.

For instance, when you're walking away from a bus that's just been attacked by monster hags and blown up by lightning, and it's raining on top of everything else,

There were several winces. Hercules looked even a little sympathetic which had Percy blinking in surprise.

most people might think that's just really bad luck; when you're a half-blood, you understand that some divine force really is trying to mess up your day.

"Zeus probably was." Ares remarked leaning back into his throne. When he received a glare, the war god elaborated. "Because the kid's been accused of stealing the Master Bolt."

So there we were, Annabeth and Grover and I, walking through the woods along the New Jersey riverbank, the glow of New York City making the night sky yellow behind us,

Artemis looked horrified. "What about the beauty of the night sky?"

She wasn't answered, confirming her thoughts.

and the smell of the Hudson reeking in our noses.

Triton and Amphitrite gagged. "The naiads! Are they okay?" Amphitrite asked in concern. "And the river gods?"

Percy looked away sadly remembering the looks of the East and Hudson river gods, before the sand dollar was given.

Grover was shivering and braying, his big goat eyes turned slit-pupiled and full of terror.

"Three Kindly Ones. All three at once."

The Kindly Ones in question cackled, enjoying the fear they had induced, but their laughter didn't last long, their minds plagued with questions.
I was pretty much in shock myself. The explosion of bus windows still rang in my ears. But Annabeth kept pulling us along, saying: "Come on! The farther away we get, the better."

"A good idea. Otherwise your scent would linger inviting other monsters to join in the attack. Especially since they would be sure to have the Furies as allies." Artemis agreed grudgingly.

"All our money was back there," I reminded her. "Our food and clothes. Everything."

All of the demigods winced. They knew all too well the struggle of being on a quest without any supplies, or options of help with a deadline looming.

"Well, maybe if you hadn't decided to jump into the fight-"

"She is kidding right?" Persephone asked in amusement.

Hades nodded, "the Furies would have torn her apart otherwise."

Percy gave a sheepish grin, unable to defend Annabeth.

"What did you want me to do? Let you get killed?"

"It would be a faster way for her to confront Hades." Demeter chuckled.

"You didn't need to protect me, Percy. I would've been fine."

Megaera gave a psychotic smile. "I'll remember that half-blood. And when the time comes, you will feel my wrath."

Tisiphone preened her wings, allowing the others to have a clear view of her sharp teeth. "Underestimating us, or pretending we aren't dangerous will only cause us to hunt whoever it is down."

"Sliced like sandwich bread,"

"Tyson would probably like that." Percy mused. The others looked at him, completely freaked out by his nonchalance.

Grover put in, "but fine."

"Shut up, goat boy," said Annabeth.

"Hey! That's my name for him!" Thalia protested.

Grover brayed mournfully. "Tin cans...A perfectly good bag of tin cans."

"Of course that's what he misses. Food." Dionysus shook his head in fond exasperation.

We sloshed across mushy ground, through nasty twisted trees that smelled like sour laundry.

The gods that were connected to nature all started to appear ill.

After a few minutes, Annabeth fell into line next to me. "Look, I..." Her voice faltered. "I appreciate your coming back for us, okay? That was really brave."

"She has too much pride." Athena stated quietly. "Right?"
"Its her fatal flaw." Percy revealed.

"Sounds like something she inherited from you." Triton put in. Athena flinched a little, but bowed her head choosing to remain silent.

"We're a team, right?"

"The Romans didn't eat you alive?" Jason questioned.

Percy only laughed. "Nope. Made me praetor."

"I know." Jason shook his head in disbelief.

She was silent for a few more steps. "It's just that if you died...Aside from the fact that it would really suck for you, it would mean the quest was over. This may be my only chance to see the real world."

"Her only chance?" Nico sounded confused. "Didn't she used to live in the real world?"

"Five years is a long time. You forget a lot. Miss a lot." Thalia answered sadly.

The thunderstorm had finally let up. The city glow faded behind us, leaving us in almost total darkness. I couldn't see anything of Annabeth except a glint of her blond hair.

"You haven't left Camp Half-Blood since you were seven?" I asked her.

"Wait. When you all say camp is safe-haven you mean..."

"Yeah. Could practically live there forever. Not that anyone does. Once you're legal, you have the choice to leave and try to make it in the real world. If you live that long to begin with that is."

"No...Only short field trips. My dad-"

"What sort of field trips?"

"The history professor."

"He remembered?" Hephaestus cocked his head thoughtfully. Aphrodite shot her husband a speculative glance.

"Yeah. It didn't work out for me living at home. I mean, Camp Half-Blood is my home."

"Annie." Thalia sighed softly.

She was rushing her words out now, as if she were afraid somebody might try to stop her. "At camp you train and train. And that's all cool and everything, but the real world is where the monsters are. That's where you learn whether you're any good or not."

"Most people would kill to not have to fight against monsters for real." The respect in Jason's voice indicated he was impressed.

If I didn't know better, I could've sworn I heard doubt in her voice.

"You're pretty good with that knife," I said.
Thalia and Percy exchanged glances. Thalia knew that Percy now knew, Luke had given Annabeth her treasured knife. She just didn't know what he thought or how he felt about it.

"You think so?"

"Anybody who can piggyback-ride a Fury is okay by me."

The Furies in question grumbled, with Alecto going as far as to say that it must've been a fluke that wisdom's daughter was able to get so close to them without the Furies killing her.

I couldn't really see, but I thought she might've smiled.

"You know," she said, "maybe I should tell you...Something funny back on the bus..."

"Funny? More like strange." Perseus said. The people around him jumped, startled after hearing him speak due to his prolonged silence.

Whatever she wanted to say was interrupted by a shrill toot-toot-toot, like the sound of an owl being tortured.

Athena let out a horrified gasp.

"Hey, my reed pipes still work!" Grover cried.

"I'm telling Goat boy you said that." Thalia laughed Percy just rolled his eyes.

"If I could just remember a 'find path' song, we could get out of these woods!"

He puffed out a few notes, but the tune still sounded suspiciously like Hilary Duff.

"He was a fan?" Thalia, Jason and Nico asked in horror and disgust.

"Wait were you?" Nico turned to Percy.

"I listened to her occasionally. I went to school with Richie Rich leave me alone." Percy groaned.

Instead of finding a path, I immediately slammed into a tree and got a nice-size knot on my head.

Hermes as the god of paths and travelers winced and felt rather sympathetic not only for Percy but the young satyr as well.

Add to the list of superpowers I did not have: infrared vision.

After tripping and cursing and generally feeling miserable for another mile or so, I started to see light up ahead: the colors of a neon sign. I could smell food. Fried, greasy, excellent food.

"Finally some good luck!" Hera said optimistically. No one noticed Percy glance at his namesake warily.

I realized I hadn't eaten anything unhealthy since I'd arrived at Half-Blood Hill, where we lived on grapes, bread, cheese, and extra-lean-cut nymph-prepared barbecue. This boy needed a double cheeseburger.

"I live for cheeseburgers." Thalia announced.
"We know." The two future Greek boys teased. Jason felt a stab in his chest, realizing he knew next to nothing about his sister.

We kept walking until I saw a deserted two-lane road through the trees. On the other side was a closed down gas station, a tattered billboard for a 1990s movie, and one open business, which was the source of the neon light and the good smell.

"Seems bit like a trap." Perseus commented.

"Lighten up. You're just paranoid." Orion brushed Perseus' worry away.

It wasn't a fast-food restaurant like I'd hoped. It was one of those weird roadside curio shops that sell lawn flamingos and wooden Indians and cement grizzly bears and stuff like that. The main building was a long, low warehouse, surrounded by acres of statuary. The neon sign above the gate was impossible for me to read, because if there's anything worse for my dyslexia than regular English, it's red cursive neon English.

Dionysus snickered. The wine god hated demigods and anything he could do to make their lives more miserable he would. The book was being quite handy in telling him how to do just that. Percy paled realizing that he was the reason that Mr. D had the ability to make his life so horrible.

To me, it looked like: ATNYU MES GDERAN GOMEN MEPROUIM.

"What?" Several people asked. Zeus repeated the sentence but it still made little to no sense.

"Oh!" Percy exclaimed. "He reading it the way my dyslexia makes it seem." Zeus nodded, grasping the book tightly and continued on.

"What the heck does that say?" I asked.

"I don't know," Annabeth said.

She loved reading so much, I'd forgotten she was dyslexic, too.

"She's dyslexic?"

"Yeah. Most demigods are." Nico shrugged.

Grover translated: "Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium."

Flanking the entrance, as advertised, were two cement garden gnomes, ugly bearded little runts, smiling and waving, as if they were about to get their picture taken.

Statues. Aunt Em. M. Perseus paled realizing who their next enemy was instantly. Percy put a finger to his lips signaling him to remain quiet. Perseus nodded but clenched his fists in worry regardless.

I crossed the street, following the smell of the hamburgers.

"Hey..." Grover warned.

Perseus glared at Percy. What was the point of bring along a satyr if they weren't going to listen when he smelled something. Percy shot him a sheepish grin.

"The lights are on inside," Annabeth said. "Maybe it's open."
"Snack bar," I said wistfully.

"Snack bar," she agreed.

"Food is rare on quests. Can't blame you two." Jason agreed.

Perseus disagreed. Percy pointed avoided looking at the boy his name came from.

"Are you two crazy?" Grover said. "This place is weird."

We ignored him.

Percy could tell that Perseus was close to exploding. Perseus honestly wanted to grab Percy and shake some sense into him.

The front lot was a forest of statues: cement animals, cement children, even a cement satyr playing the pipes, which gave Grover the creeps.

"Bla-ha-ha!" he bleated. "Looks like my Uncle Ferdinand!"

It clicked. "Medusa?" Poseidon asked.

Perseus huffed and confirmed their thoughts.

"You're not a statue?" Zoë asked surprised. Percy laughed as he shook his head.

We stopped at the warehouse door.

"Don't knock," Grover pleaded. "I smell monsters."

"Why can't you listen?" Perseus moaned finally able to voice his worry. "I knew this was a trap."

"It's okay. Zoë even had me confirm I'm not a statue." Percy tried to reassure. Tried. Well no one ever said he was a good comforter.

"Your nose is clogged up from the Furies," Annabeth told him. "All I smell is burgers. Aren't you hungry?"

"Meat!" he said scornfully. "I'm a vegetarian."

"An excellent way to live." Artemis smiled slightly.

"He's half goat. All goats are vegetarian." Orion pointed out. Artemis hushed him quickly.

"You eat cheese enchiladas and aluminum cans," I reminded him.

"Those are vegetables.

"Not really. But they're not meat either so his argument stands." Nico shrugged.


Come on. Let's leave. These statues are...Looking at me."

"Yes. Leave. And never come back." Ariadne said worriedly. Dionysus only rolled his eyes at his
wife for caring about more heroes.

Then the door creaked open, and standing in front of us was a tall Middle Eastern woman—at least, I assumed she was Middle Eastern, because she wore a long black gown that covered everything but her hands, and her head was completely veiled. Her eyes glinted behind a curtain of black gauze, but that was about all I could make out. Her coffee-colored hands looked old, but well-manicured and elegant, so I imagined she was a grandmother who had once been a beautiful lady.

"Once. A long time ago." Poseidon admitted earning a look of disgust from his immortal child.

Her accent sounded vaguely Middle Eastern, too. She said, "Children, it is too late to be out all alone. Where are your parents?"

"They're...Um..." Annabeth started to say.

"We're orphans," I said.

Poseidon and Athena shot Percy a look. He shrugged.

"Orphans?" the woman said. The word sounded alien in her mouth. "But, my dears! Surely not!"

"They're not." Came the irritated reply.

"We got separated from our caravan," I said. "Our circus caravan. The ringmaster told us to meet him at the gas station if we got lost, but he may have forgotten, or maybe he meant a different gas station. Anyway, we're lost. Is that food I smell?"

Everyone turned slowly to stare at Percy. "I was really hungry." He defended.

"Oh, my dears," the woman said. "You must come in, poor children. I am Aunty Em. Go straight through to the back of the warehouse, please. There is a dining area."

"How convenient." Perseus glared. Percy deadpanned, at his hatred for Medusa. Not that Percy blamed him, but Medusa had helped him save Andromeda. "It's a bad memory. Pegasus and Chrysaor were borne from their mother's corpse. That guilt..." Perseus trailed off, his voice quiet and Percy nodded in understanding.

We thanked her and went inside.

Annabeth muttered to me, "Circus caravan?"

"I'm judging you for that." Thalia, Nico and Jason all announced.

"Gee thanks guys." Percy rolled his eyes.

"Always have a strategy, right?"

"Your head is full of kelp."

"Truer words have never been spoken Kelp Head." Thalia smirked, putting an emphasis on the nickname.
The warehouse was filled with more statues—people in all different poses, wearing all different outfits and with different expressions on their faces. I was thinking you'd have to have a pretty huge garden to fit even one of these statues, because they were all life-size. But mostly, I was thinking about food.

"Monster food causes a craving that cannot be stopped rationally." Hercules gave Percy, but his unimpressed stare was quite off-putting.

Go ahead, call me an idiot for walking into a strange lady's shop like that just because I was hungry,

"Idiot." Everyone else in the room declared.

but I do impulsive stuff sometimes. Plus, you've never smelled Aunty Em's burgers. The aroma was like laughing gas in the dentist's chair—it made everything else go away.

"That's because its magical." Theseus grouched. "Can't you stop having to fight monsters that gave us such a hard time with? At least at the age of twelve?" He demanded.

Percy looked at him apologetically, certain that he had fought most of the prominent monsters in the myths.

I barely noticed Grover's nervous whimpers, or the way the statues' eyes seemed to follow me, or the fact that Aunty Em had locked the door behind us.

Perseus let out a mix between a groan and a muffled scream. Percy winced.

All I cared about was finding the dining area. And sure enough, there it was at the back of the warehouse, a fast-food counter with a grill, a soda fountain, a pretzel heater, and a nacho cheese dispenser. Everything you could want, plus a few steel picnic tables out front.

The futures sighed dreamily at the thought of junk food. Then the other three's eyes widened. No wonder Percy and the rest couldn't stop themselves, they were dreaming about it, after only hearing about it. They couldn't imagine how the trio must have felt.

"Please, sit down," Aunty Em said.


"Awesome," I said.

"Um," Grover said reluctantly, "we don't have any money, ma'am."

"He's honest." Demeter smiled, letting go of her concern immediately.

"Too honest," his two best friends and first demigod finds groused.

Before I could jab him in the ribs, Aunty Em said, "No, no, children. No money. This is a special case, yes? It is my treat, for such nice orphans."

"She knew who the three of you are?" Athena stated more than asked. No reply was necessary.

"Thank you, ma'am," Annabeth said.
Aunty Em stiffened, as if Annabeth had done something wrong, but then the old woman relaxed just as quickly, so I figured it must've been my imagination.

"She's not going to take out her hatred of me on Annabeth is she?" Athena asked in bewilderment.

"You mean, that thing you always do?" Triton said in mock amazement. Athena flinched feeling a little guilty seeing things in perspective.

"Quite all right, Annabeth," she said. "You have such beautiful gray eyes, child."

"She really hates me." Athena bit her lip, considering her vengeful actions for the first time.

"Well you did turn her into a creature that turns whoever looks at her in the eye to stone. Even I never did anything that horrible." Hera smirked.

Only later did I wonder how she knew Annabeth's name, even though we had never introduced ourselves.

"Oh that? Monsters have their ways." Theseus shrugged. "They know all of us."

Our hostess disappeared behind the snack counter and started cooking. Before we knew it, she'd brought us plastic trays heaped with double cheeseburgers, vanilla shakes, and XXL servings of French fries.

I was halfway through my burger before I remembered to breathe.

Perseus buried his head in his hands trying not to react, just like Percy had asked.

"Sorry. I realize Medusa was a really big challenge for you, but I needed everyone to stop. She's the beginning of the insanity that is my life. And after the reaction with the Minotaur, we'd never get through this book, let alone the rest of them." Perseus sighed in agreement, the life of a hero was dangerous he knew that, but it was much harder to hear about someone else's life like this.

Annabeth slurped her shake.

Grover picked at the fries, and eyed the tray's waxed paper liner as if he might go for that, but he still looked too nervous to eat.

"What's that hissing noise?" he asked.

"Snakes." Dionysus said gleefully, the only one other than Ares who was enjoying this chapter.

I listened, but didn't hear anything. Annabeth shook her head.

"Hissing?" Aunty Em asked. "Perhaps you hear the deep-fryer oil. You have keen ears, Grover."

"A real talent." Thalia and Percy said solemnly.

"I take vitamins. For my ears."

"He can lie about that?" Hermes asked bemused.

"Grover is special." Nico put in.
"That's admirable," she said. "But please, relax."

Aunty Em ate nothing. She hadn't taken off her head-dress, even to cook, and now she sat forward and interlaced her fingers and watched us eat. It was a little unsettling, having someone stare at me when I couldn't see her face, but I was feeling satisfied after the burger, and a little sleepy,

"Drugged burgers? That's an atrocity." Jason gasped.

"You and Thalia are definitely related." Percy whispered in his ear.

and I figured the least I could do was try to make small talk with our hostess.

"So, you sell gnomes," I said, trying to sound interested.

"First smart decision you've made since going there," Orion cheered. Percy looked up at the ceiling as if it held the answers for his life choices.

"Oh, yes," Aunty Em said. "And animals. And people. Anything for the garden. Custom orders. Statuary is very popular, you know."

"A lot of business on this road?"

"Not so much, no.

"Thank the gods." Came the immediate reaction.

Athena had trouble swallowing, realizing that innocent people were being killed in the worst way possible because of her rash decision.

Since the highway was built...Most cars, they do not go this way now. I must cherish every customer I get."

"A monster capable of thinking, but choosing not to." Amphitrite sneered.

"But Mother, she doesn't have a choice. It must get lonely and its not her fault that people are turned to stone if they look at her." Triton pointed out. Neither of them blamed Medusa, for Poseidon's actions seeing as the poor girl had already been punished along with her sisters. Athena had been wrong to do that to her.

My neck tingled, as if somebody else was looking at me. I turned, but it was just a statue of a young girl holding an Easter basket. The detail was incredible, much better than you see in most garden statues. But something was wrong with her face. It looked as if she were startled, or even terrified.

"Yes. Use your brain Jackson. Get out of there." Percy blinked realizing that Hades was rooting for him to live.

"Ah," Aunty Em said sadly. "You notice some of my creations do not turn out well. They are marred. They do not sell. The face is the hardest to get right. Always the face."

"You make these statues yourself?" I asked.

"Her unbreakable curse, hindering not only her but the rest of us good people." Persephone
"Oh, yes. Once upon a time, I had two sisters to help me in the business, but they have passed on, and Aunty Em is alone. I have only my statues. This is why I make them, you see. They are my company." The sadness in her voice sounded so deep and so real that I couldn't help feeling sorry for her.

"We all do to an extent." Hercules said with a side-long glance at Perseus.

Annabeth had stopped eating. She sat forward and said, "Two sisters?"

"She got it now," Ares leaned forward, ready for the action to begin.

"It's a terrible story," Aunty Em said. "Not one for children, really. You see, Annabeth, a bad woman was jealous of me,

"Jealous?!" Athena shrieked outraged. "Of what?!"

long ago, when I was young. I had a... A boyfriend, you know,

Triton and Amphitrite rolled their eyes. Neither could believe that Medusa still loved Poseidon, after all the suffering she had gotten from doing so.

and this bad woman was determined to break us apart.

"That had nothing to do with anything, it was because of the disrespect I was given, and I see now that I may have been a little rash regarding her fate." Athena admitted reluctantly. Hestia smiled at Athena, glad the goddess had begun to own up to her mistakes.

She caused a terrible accident. My sisters stayed by me. They shared my bad fortune as long as they could, but eventually they passed on. They faded away.

"Obviously not." Percy grumbled crossly. The gorgon sisters had been his worst fight yet. The ones who overheard him, shot him nervous looks.

I alone have survived, but at a price. Such a price."

I wasn't sure what she meant, but I felt bad for her. My eyelids kept getting heavier, my full stomach making me sleepy. Poor old lady. Who would want to hurt somebody so nice?

"You're falling for her spell." Thalia whispered terrified for Percy. Percy's eyes widened in surprise that even Thalia was so scared, and he began to seriously worry as to how they would react to the really deadly stuff he had gone through.

"Percy?" Annabeth was shaking me to get my attention. "Maybe we should go. I mean, the ringmaster will be waiting."

She sounded tense. I wasn't sure why. Grover was eating the waxed paper off the tray now, but if Aunty Em found that strange, she didn't say anything.

"You make it so obvious thou are new to our world," Zoë commented, but her worried tone betrayed her light-hearted words.

"Such beautiful gray eyes," Aunty Em told Annabeth again. "My, yes, it has been a long time
since I've seen gray eyes like those

Athena snapped her eyes shut unable to hear if her daughter would be killed. She could feel Triton's gaze on her, knowing her fear was something Triton had to live through because of her.

She reached out as if to stroke Annabeth's cheek, but Annabeth stood up abruptly.

"We really should go."

"Yes!" Grover swallowed his waxed paper and stood up. "The ringmaster is waiting! Right!"

I didn't want to leave.

"Percy." His namesake wailed in dismay, "Why can't you stop giving me a heart attack?"

"I'm not trying to!"

"You're being reluctant to leave Medusa, I think you are!"

I felt full and content. Aunty Em was so nice. I wanted to stay with her a while.

"Please, dears, " Aunty Em pleaded. "I so rarely get to be with children. Before you go, won't you at least sit for a pose?"

Nearly everyone present groaned, their concern steadily increasing.

"A pose?" Annabeth asked warily.

"A photograph. I will use it to model a new statue set. Children are so popular, you see. Everyone loves children."

"Yeah, alive though." Hades yawned, thoroughly disgusted by Medusa's attitude.

Annabeth shifted her weight from foot to foot. "I don't think we can, ma'am. Come on, Percy-"

"Sure we can," I said. I was irritated with Annabeth for being so bossy, so rude to an old lady who'd just fed us for free. "It's just a photo, Annabeth. What's the harm?"

Thalia smacked Percy upside the head, right when Jason jabbed him in the ribs. "Ouch!" Percy yelped.

"Idiot." The duo remarked irritated.

"Yes, Annabeth," the woman purred. "No harm."

I could tell Annabeth didn't like it, but she allowed Aunty Em to lead us back out the front door, into the garden of statues.

"Of all the times for Annabeth to not be argumentative!" Orion's eyes reflected the horror he was feeling.

Aunty Em directed us to a park bench next to the stone satyr. "Now," she said, "I'll just position you correctly. The young girl in the middle, I think, and the two young gentlemen on
either side."

"Not much light for a photo," I remarked.

"Come on. Come on." Though they were aware that he would survive, Thalia and Nico had bowed their heads chanting their hopes for Percy's survival. Percy began to dread the reading going forward.

"Oh, enough," Aunty Em said. "Enough for us to see each other, yes?"

"Where's your camera?" Grover asked.

Aunty Em stepped back, as if to admire the shot. "Now, the face is the most difficult. Can you smile for me please, everyone? A large smile?"

Grover glanced at the cement satyr next to him, and mumbled, "That sure does look like Uncle Ferdinand."

"Poor Uncle Ferdinand," Hermes mourned. As glances were cast his way, the god shrugged, "Ferdinand was a satyr." Dionysus rolled his eyes, Hermes' so-called devotion to satyrs really annoyed him.

"Grover," Aunty Em chastised, "look this way, dear."

She still had no camera in her hands.

"Percy-" Annabeth said.

Some instinct warned me to listen to Annabeth,

"Listen to it." Zoë suggested, throwing Percy in for a loop. Perhaps she didn't hate him as much as she claimed to. Artemis watched Zoë carefully, reviewing the girl's attitude mentally.

but I was fighting the sleepy feeling, the comfortable lull that came from the food and the old lady's voice.

"I will just be a moment," Aunty Em said. "You know, I can't see you very well in this cursed veil..."

Perseus had his head in his hands, as he repeated to himself, "No, not again. Leave him alone. Medusa can't be able to kill anyone in front of me again!" Hestia became concerned, seeing Perseus lose his composure.

"Percy, something's wrong." Annabeth insisted.

"Evidently," Amphitrite sighed, but her voice lacked her usual bite.

"Wrong?" Aunty Em said, reaching up to undo the wrap around her head. "Not at all, dear. I have such noble company tonight. What could be wrong?"

"That is Uncle Ferdinand!" Grover gasped.

"Hallelujah! Now run as far as you possibly can!" Theseus threw his hands in the air relieved he didn't have to hear about his younger brother's suffering. He paused wondering when he had become so attached to Percy.
"Look away from her!" Annabeth shouted. She whipped her Yankees cap onto her head and vanished. Her invisible hands pushed Grover and me both off the bench.

I was on the ground, looking at Aunt Em's sandaled feet.

"DON'T LOOK UP!" Several cried out fearing the worst.

I could hear Grover scrambling off in one direction, Annabeth in another. But I was too dazed to move.

Then I heard a strange, rasping sound above me. My eyes rose to Aunty Em's hands, which had turned gnarled and warty, with sharp bronze talons for fingernails.

I almost looked higher,

Half the throne room had begun hyperventilating at this point, all of them knowing exactly what Medusa was capable of.

but somewhere off to my left Annabeth screamed, "No! Don't!"

"Thank the gods for Annabeth," Demeter grinned happily before pausing. "Huh, never thought I'd say that. The girl is surprisingly reliable."

More rasping—the sound of tiny snakes, right above me, from...From about where Aunty Em's head would be.

"Run!" Grover bleated. I heard him racing across the gravel, yelling, "Maia!" to kick-start his flying sneakers.

Hermes tried and failed to grin at the mention of the adaption of his own flying sandals. Honestly he really only cared about the satyr, but he would never admit that to Poseidon, he enjoyed having all his limbs intact.

I couldn't move. I stared at Aunty Em's gnarled claws, and tried to fight the groggy trance the old woman had put me in.

"Such a pity to destroy a handsome young face," she told me soothingly. "Stay with me, Percy. All you have to do is look up."

"She still likes you," Amphitrite stated in a mixture of disgust and pity. Poseidon grimaced, he would forever feel guilty about what happened to Medusa.

I fought the urge to obey. Instead I looked to one side and saw one of those glass spheres people put in gardens - a gazing ball. I could see Aunty Em's dark reflection in the orange glass; her headdress was gone, revealing her face as a shimmering pale circle. Her hair was moving, writhing like serpents.

Aunty Em.

Aunty "M."

"It took you that long?" Nico snapped grasping Percy's arm tightly for a moment before letting go quickly and looking away.
Percy didn’t notice Nico’s inner turmoil, apologizing for his younger self’s idiocy. "W-whatever, be more vigilant from now on." Nico mumbled, pink dusting his cheeks. Percy grinned brightly in response.

**How could I have been so stupid?**

"Question of the century." Jason shook his head, questioning yet again how Percy managed to become praetor.

**Think, I told myself. How did Medusa die in the myth?**

**But I couldn't think. Something told me that in the myth Medusa had been asleep when she was attacked by my namesake, Perseus.**

"Do you want to know?" Percy nodded rapidly, his curiosity about Perseus' behavior taking over.

Perseus voice took on a far-away sound. "King Polydectes ordered me to bring him Medusa's head. Thanks to Lady Athena and Lord Hermes' help I was given materials to assist me in my quest. I did indeed attack the gorgon when she slept, but she awoke as I fought her. Only due to quick reflexes and the reflective shield did I kill her before she did me. I lost many of my comrades against her. Not all of them were petrified as a whole. When her two children were borne...I will never forget that moment. Those majestic creatures coming out of the bloody and mangled corpse of their mother. Their innocence ripped away before they even got a good look of the world," Perseus' voice choked and he was unable to continue his tale.

Everyone there, blinked tears out of their eyes desiring to return to Percy's story, their sympathy for his namesake increasing.

She wasn't anywhere near asleep now. If she wanted, she could take those talons right now and rake open my face.

"'The Gray-Eyed One did this to me, Percy,'" Medusa said, and she didn't sound anything like a monster. Her voice invited me to look up, to sympathize with a poor old grandmother.

Immediately the course of action was regretted, hearing about Percy's plausible death stung as well.

"'Annabeth's mother, the cursed Athena, turned me from a beautiful woman into this.'"

Athena flinched learning for the first time, the negative impact her actions have on others, her own children.

"'Don't listen to her!'" Annabeth's voice shouted, some-where in the statuary. "'Run, Percy!'"

"'Silence!'" Medusa snarled. Then her voice modulated back to a comforting purr. "'You see why I must destroy the girl, Percy. She is my enemy's daughter. I shall crush her statue to dust. But you, dear Percy, you need not suffer.'"

Athena gaped in horror. On the other hand, Poseidon felt weak himself. He had abandoned Medusa yet her feelings remained as strong as ever, the guilt in his heart burned hotter.

"'No,'" I muttered. I tried to make my legs move.

"Do you really want to help the gods?" Medusa asked. "Do you understand what awaits you on this foolish quest, Percy? What will happen if you reach the Underworld? Do not be a
pawn of the Olympians, my dear. You would be better off as a statue. Less pain. Less pain."

"No pain no gain!" Jason protested. "Being a statue is worthless."

"I figured. That's why I didn't take her up on her offer," Percy drawled.

"Percy!" Behind me, I heard a buzzing sound, like a two-hundred-pound hummingbird in a nosedive. Grover yelled, "Duck!"

"Wonder Boy to the rescue!" Jason smirked.

"Um no. It's Goat Boy actually," Thalia countered smiling.

I turned, and there he was in the night sky, flying in from twelve o'clock with his winged shoes fluttering, Grover, holding a tree branch the size of a baseball bat. His eyes were shut tight, his head twitched from side to side. He was navigating by ears and nose alone.

"Duck!" he yelled again. "I'll get her!"

That finally jolted me into action. Knowing Grover, I was sure he'd miss Medusa and nail me.

"Your lack of faith is astounding," Apollo said dryly.

"Who cares about his lack of faith? The satyr probably saved his life!" Persephone countered. Apollo conceded.

I dove to one side.

Thwack!

Several people winced fearing for the worst.

At first I figured it was the sound of Grover hitting a tree. Then Medusa roared with rage.

Hermes grinned joyously. Finally a satyr had the glory! He only wished Pan could be here to hear about it, then shrugged figuring he would tell his son himself.

"You miserable satyr," she snarled. "I'll add you to my collection!"

"That was for Uncle Ferdinand!" Grover yelled back.

"May we have a moment for the late dear Uncle Ferdinand?" Apollo asked a glimmer of his former humor returning.

Ares and Hermes immediately bowed their heads. Ares snickered thinking about the great fight he was going to get to hear.

I scrambled away and hid in the statuary while Grover swooped down for another pass.

Ker-whack!

"Arrgh!" Medusa yelled, her snake-hair hissing and spitting.

"Ugh," Aphrodite grimaced in disgust, throwing a nasty look at Athena for creating such an atrocity.
Right next to me, Annabeth's voice said, "Percy!"

I jumped so high my feet nearly cleared a garden gnome. "Jeez! Don't do that!"

The future demigods burst out laughing at the mental picture. Percy rolled his eyes, inwardly glad for the tension release.

Annabeth took off her Yankees cap and became visible. 'You have to cut her head off."

"What? Are you crazy? Let's get out of here."

"Agreed. Getting out of there is a good idea!" Perseus insisted.

"Medusa is a menace. She's evil."

"She wasn't always that way," Triton muttered quietly causing Athena to flinch.

I'd kill her myself, but..." Annabeth swallowed, as if she were about to make a difficult admission. "But you've got the better weapon. Besides, I'd never get close to her. She'd slice me to bits because of my mother.

Athena stood up; the others blinked at her in confusion.

Zeus stared at her from over the book cover. "Sit back down Athena."

Not being able to do anything else Athena complied.

You-you've got a chance."

"What? I can't-"

"Look, do you want her turning more innocent people into statues?"

Everyone groaned. "You're twelve. How is you going up against Medusa beneficial? All it'll do is get you killed," Hephaestus said gruffly. Percy simply smiled at the concern.

She pointed to a pair of statue lovers, a man and a woman with their arms around each other, turned to stone by the monster.

Aphrodite flinched. "Love was stolen from her, so she stole it from another," her voice was sad and it sounded as if the love goddess were about to cry. Ares put an arm around her to comfort her, but his eyes glowed with excitement for the upcoming fight.

Annabeth grabbed a green gazing ball from a nearby pedestal. "A polished shield would be better." She studied the sphere critically. "The convexity will cause some distortion. The reflection's size should be off by a factor of,"

Zeus stuttered as he read. "W-what is she saying?"

"Physics." Thalia sighed. Zeus opened his moth to respond but then Hera smiled sweetly, "Zeus, do you wish to lose?" The King of the Gods continued reading.

"Would you speak English?"
"I am!"

"Debatable." The demigods called out.

She tossed me the glass ball. "Just look at her in the glass. Never look at her directly."

"Hey, guys!" Grover yelled somewhere above us. "I think she's unconscious!"

"Really?" Perseus gasped, eyes wide. Zeus hated to disappoint his son but read the next sentence.

"Roooaaarr!

Perseus' face grew weary once more and his shoulders drooped.

"Maybe not," Grover corrected. He went in for another pass with the tree branch.

"Hurry," Annabeth told me. "Grover's got a great nose, but he'll eventually crash."

"Her energy level is pretty high if she's ready for a fight." Perseus reluctantly agreed.

I took out my pen and uncapped it. The bronze blade of Riptide elongated in my hand.

I followed the hissing and spitting sounds of Medusa's hair.

Percy blinked as Thalia and Nico both grasped on to his hands. He looked between the two then sat back with a frown.

I kept my eyes locked on the gazing ball so I would only glimpse Medusa's reflection, not the real thing. Then, in the green tinted glass, I saw her.

Grover was coming in for another turn at bat, but this time he flew a little too low. Medusa grabbed the stick and pulled him off course. He tumbled through the air and crashed into the arms of a stone grizzly bear with a painful "Ummph!"

"That must've hurt," Demeter blanched.

Medusa was about to lunge at him when I yelled, "Hey!"

I advanced on her, which wasn't easy, holding a sword and a glass ball. If she charged, I'd have a hard time defending myself.

But she let me approach-twenty feet, ten feet.

"What is she doing?" Alecto asked in bewilderment.

Megaera lifted a talon, "Looks like Medusa is sentimental, even if it leads to her death."

Tisiphone looked impressed, "Probably thinks she can prevent him from killing her."

I could see the reflection of her face now. Surely it wasn't really that ugly. The green swirls of the gazing ball must be distorting it, making it look worse.

Jason stared at Percy in disbelief.

"You wouldn't harm an old woman, Percy," she crooned. "I know you wouldn't."
I hesitated, fascinated by the face I saw reflected in the glass—the eyes that seemed to burn straight through the green tint, making my arms go weak.

Thalia and Nico's grip grew stronger yet they both had forgotten to breathe.

From the cement grizzly, Grover moaned, "Percy, don't listen to her!"

Medusa cackled. "Too late."

She lunged at me with her talons.

The entire throne room had gone silent.

I slashed up with my sword, heard a sickening shlock!, then a hiss like wind rushing out of a cavern—the sound of a monster disintegrating.

"Oh thank the gods." Theseus burst out similar exclamations of relief following shortly afterwards, as it registered that Percy was finally out of danger.

Something fell to the ground next to my foot. It took all my willpower not to look. I could feel warm ooze soaking into my sock, little dying snake heads tugging at my shoelaces.

Perseus paled. "Don't look! Her powers of petrification still work even in death!" Percy patted him on the shoulder signaling it was all okay.

"Oh, yuck," Grover said. His eyes were still tightly closed, but I guess he could hear the thing gurgling and steaming. "Mega-yuck."

Several goddesses looked as if they were about to hurl.

Annabeth came up next to me, her eyes fixed on the sky. She was holding Medusa's black veil. She said, "Don't move."

Very, very carefully, without looking down, she knelt and draped the monster's head in black cloth, then picked it up. It was still dripping green juice.

Persephone gagged and Hades rubbed her hand and back to comfort her. She leaned into her husband's touch.

"Are you okay?" she asked me, her voice trembling.

"Yeah," I decided, though I felt like throwing up my double cheeseburger.

"Don't blame you. That was incredible." Ares complimented Percy, making the young demigod realize he truly was in the past.

"Why didn't...Why didn't the head evaporate?"

"Once you sever it, it becomes a spoil of war," she said. "Same as your minotaur horn. But don't unwrap the head. It can still petrify you."

"It's a useful trick," Percy grinned happily remembering exactly what it had been utilized for. The others were curious but knew better than to ask.
Grover moaned as he climbed down from the grizzly statue. He had a big welt on his forehead. His green rasta cap hung from one of his little goat horns, and his fake feet had been knocked off his hooves. The magic sneakers were flying aimlessly around his head.


Jason shrugged, "Grover is no Coach Hedge, but he's pretty cool."

"G-Man is better than cool. He's the best," Percy told him. Jason put his hands up signaling a truce.


"Who?" Dionysus asked.


"I'm surprised you know about him." Nico admitted, causing Percy to shoot him an annoyed look.

He managed a bashful grin. "That really was not fun, though. Well, the hitting-her-with-a-stick part, that was fun. But crashing into a concrete bear? Not fun."

There was laughter at that, the mood in the room brightening with the demise of Medusa.

He snatched his shoes out of the air. I recapped my sword. Together, the three of us stumbled back to the warehouse.

We found some old plastic grocery bags behind the snack counter and double-wrapped Medusa's head.

"Good idea," Hercules complimented. Percy nodded his head to let Hercules know he had heard.

We plopped it on the table where we'd eaten dinner and sat around it, too exhausted to speak.

Finally I said, "So we have Athena to thank for this monster?"

"Yes. And her existence was a rash and immature decision on my part, I can see that now. I apologize for my actions." Athena stood up and addressed the room. Slowly they all nodded in acceptance regarding Medusa. Percy didn't forgive her for Arachne, not yet maybe not ever.

Annabeth flashed me an irritated look. "Your dad, actually. Don't you remember? Medusa was Poseidon's girlfriend. They decided to meet in my mother's temple. That's why Athena turned her into a monster. Medusa and her two sisters who had helped her get into the temple, they became the three gorgons.

"It wasn't that simple," Athena countered sadly.

"No. She was your head priestess and overcome with rage you turned her into something despicable. But hey, water under the bridge right?" Triton smiled sarcastically. The goddess of wisdom turned away from him.

That's why Medusa wanted to slice me up, but she wanted to preserve you as a nice statue. She's still sweet on your dad. You probably reminded her of him."

"That's true," Amphitrite acknowledged making Percy's face to melt into a mask of pure horror. The
sea queen giggled at his expression realizing he really was different from other heroes.

My face was burning. "Oh, so now it's my fault we met Medusa."

"No. Its both of your faults," Perseus stated bluntly. When they turned to him for an answer his only reply was, "Their overwhelming need for food." Percy sighed loudly and was promptly ignored.

Annabeth straightened. In a bad imitation of my voice, she said: "It's just a photo, Annabeth. What's the harm?"

"Its magic, not really your fault." Hercules pointed out.

"Forget it," I said. "You're impossible."

"You're insufferable."

"You're-"

"Hey!" Grover interrupted. "You two are giving me a migraine, and satyrs don't even get migraines.

"Poor Grover," several of the gods said based on their own experiences of listening to Athena and Poseidon fight.

What are we going to do with the head?"

"Use it. It'll be a quick and useful way to stay safe as you hurry to the Underworld," Perseus suggested. Percy gave a nervous smile instead.

I stared at the thing. One little snake was hanging out of a hole in the plastic.

Aphrodite gagged at the description.

The words printed on the side of the bag said: WE APPRECIATE YOUR BUSINESS!

I was angry, not just with Annabeth or her mom,

"Angry?" Athena began to hiss before remembering that it was partially her fault. Mostly her fault.

but with all the gods for this whole quest, for getting us blown off the road and in two major fights the very first day out from camp. At this rate, we'd never make it to L. A. alive, much less before the summer solstice.

Every single god's face drooped. Percy hastened to correct himself, "Not you Lady Hestia. And well...sorry to everyone else?" Hestia brightened a tad, but the other gods stared at him for a moment before looking away.

What had Medusa said?

Do not be a pawn of the Olympians, my dear. You would be better off as a statue.

Theseus began to worry once more, "what are you thinking dear brother?"

"Calm down. And help once it's been read okay?" Percy retorted, his face pale.
"I got up. "I'll be back."

"Percy," Annabeth called after me. "What are you-"

I searched the back of the warehouse until I found Medusa's office. Her account book showed her six most recent sales, all shipments to the Underworld to decorate Hades and Persephone's garden.

"We haven't ordered anything yet!" Hades defended.

"I bet it'll be you who does it, insensitive, heartless..." Demeter began to mutter but Persephone cut her off.

"It said for the garden Mother! My garden! Stop blaming Hades!"

"And he's the one who got you to order those monstrous statues!"

"No he isn't!"

"Stop arguing!" Hera exclaimed. "Fight later, right now, I want to read on!" The mother-daughter duo fell silent.

According to one freight bill, the Underworld's billing address was DOA Recording Studios, West Hollywood, California. I folded up the bill and stuffed it in my pocket.

"You little thief in the making," Hermes looked proud of Percy.

The boy laughed slightly, "Thanks." Nico and Thalia stared at him, not understanding his actions.

In the cash register I found twenty dollars, a few golden drachmas, and some packing slips for Hermes Overnight Express, each with a little leather bag attached for coins. I rummaged around the rest of the office until I found the right-size box.

I went back to the picnic table, packed up Medusa's head, and filled out a delivery slip:

"Delivery slip?" Ariadne asked curiously. Percy refused to answer. Zeus growled before reading angrily.

The Gods

Mount Olympus

600th Floor,

Empire State Building

New York, NY

With best wishes, PERCY JACKSON

The room became deathly silent. Then Ares and Dionysus began to laugh their laughter causing Percy to wince. Triton shook his head in disbelief at his future half-brother. "You trying to get killed?" He asked straight up. Percy opened his mouth and closed it again unable to say anything.

Hestia tried to diffuse the situation. "Can we continue for now? Please?" Slowly the others in the
room agreed and Zeus read on.

"They're not going to like that," Grover warned. "They'll think you're impertinent."

"Understatement." Hephaestus said gruffly, "More like insane."

I poured some golden drachmas in the pouch. As soon as I closed it, there was a sound like a cash register. The package floated off the table and disappeared with a pop!

"Hermes Mail Delivery, sending you your stuff as quick as possible," Hermes sang nervously. "Makes a good jingle to get people to send stuff to me and not Iris right?"

Apollo nodded, his eyes wide open looking right at Percy.

"I am impertinent," I said.

I looked at Annabeth, daring her to criticize.

Athena waited for her daughter to give the much needed tirade. It never came.

She didn't. She seemed resigned to the fact that I had a major talent for ticking off the gods. "Come on," she muttered. "We need a new plan."


The boy put up his hands. "I'm sorry? In my defense, I was new to the demigod world, mad about what happened to my mother and about twelve years old."

Zeus continued to glare but didn't react, so Percy figured he was safe. Orion spoke up tentatively. "Uh, I can read next if that's okay," he offered. Zeus tossed the book at him, and Orion had to stretch to catch it. Zeus' stare had become stony and all the other gods didn't look at all amused.

Perseus was still calming down from his hyperventilating session as was Theseus. The other three future demigods were pale in fear for what was to come. Belatedly Orion wondered, how things could possibly get any worse. The less said about Zoë and the Furies' expressions, the better.

In short, no one looked eager to read any further. Orion gulped as he turned to the right page, wishing he hadn't offered to read.

He cleared his throat. "Uh..."...We Get Advice From A Poodle

Chapter End Notes

The gods like Percy, the gods hate Percy. It's very topsy-turvy. Lol. No, attitudes will change with more time and reading. I got my mythology from the Internet, so it might not be entirely accurate but then again there are numerous versions of the same myth so I'm going to take the one I found as 'canon' for this fic.
We were pretty miserable that night.

"You're on a quest. It probably won't be getting any better either," Hercules mentioned. Percy nodded absently.

We camped out in the woods, a hundred yards from the main road, in a marshy clearing that local kids had obviously been using for parties. The ground was littered with flattened soda cans and fast-food wrappers.

Artemis gagged, "Humans really are a curse to nature," she said in disgust.

"Pan. His domain is being destroyed," Hermes' eyes were wide, filled with worry.

We'd taken some food and blankets from Aunty Em's, but we didn't dare light a fire to dry our damp clothes. The Furies and Medusa had provided enough excitement for one day. We didn't want to attract anything else.

"Please no," Perseus and Theseus simultaneously begged.

We decided to sleep in shifts. I volunteered to take first watch.

"Really?" Thalia looked at him, Percy just scowled at her.

Annabeth curled up on the blankets and was snoring as soon as her head hit the ground. Grover fluttered with his flying shoes to the lowest bough of a tree, put his back to the trunk, and stared at the night sky.

"Time for philosophical thoughts with Goat Boy," Nico rolled his eyes. Thalia shoved him for stealing her nickname as Percy and Jason laughed.

"Go ahead and sleep," I told him. "I'll wake you if there's trouble."

He nodded, but still didn't close his eyes. "It makes me sad, Percy."

"What does? The fact that you signed up for this stupid quest?"

"It's not stupid at all," Zeus protested, "its for the Master Bolt!"

"You're right, its very sad," Hera teased her husband.

"No. This makes me sad." He pointed at all the garbage on the ground. "And the sky. You can't even see the stars. They've polluted the sky. This is a terrible time to be a satyr."

Hermes paled. "W-why is he saying that?"

Percy and Nico looked at each other realizing that Hermes was going to find out about Pan.

"Oh, yeah. I guess you'd be an environmentalist."

He glared at me. "Only a human wouldn't be. Your species is clogging up the world so
fast...ah, never mind. It's useless to lecture a human. At the rate things are going, I'll never find Pan."

"Find Pan? Why is there a need to find Pan? Where is he?" Hermes' voice was laced with genuine fear.

"Pam? Like the cooking spray?"

Several people looked at Percy seemingly unable to decide whether or not he was in possession of all his marbles. Percy simply rolled his eyes in retaliation.

"Pan!" he cried indignantly. "P-A-N. The great god Pan! What do you think I want a searcher's license for?"

The room began silent as the gods and demigods of the past feared to find out about Pan's fate.

A strange breeze rustled through the clearing, temporarily overpowering the stink of trash and muck. It brought the smell of berries and wildflowers and clean rainwater, things that might've once been in these woods. Suddenly I was nostalgic for something I'd never known.

"The power of Pan," Artemis murmured almost reverently. Even she acknowledged Pan's power, knowing without him the Hunt would exceptionally difficult to maintain. The survival of the animals depended on him.

"Tell me about the search," I said.

Grover looked at me cautiously, as if he were afraid I was just making fun.

"Which I would never do," Percy clarified immediately.

"The God of Wild Places disappeared two thousand years ago," he told me. "A sailor off the coast of Ephesos heard a mysterious voice crying out from the shore, 'Tell them that the great god Pan has died!"

"No!" Hermes gasped, shooting to his feet. "Not my son!" Apollo pulled the other god back to his throne, giving him a hug of comfort.

When humans heard the news, they believed it. They've been pillaging Pan's kingdom ever since. But for the satyrs, Pan was our lord and master. He protected us and the wild places of the earth. We refuse to believe that he died. In every generation, the bravest satyrs pledge their lives to finding Pan. They search the earth, exploring all the wildest places, hoping to find where he is hidden, and wake him from his sleep."

The gods knew that what the satyrs were doing was a pipe dream. They had hope, but they all knew better than to expect anyone would find Pan. They moved to hold a moment of silence but Hermes shaking his head distracted them.

"Don't act like he's already gone. All we have to do is change whatever causes that to happen!"

They were all properly chastised. "You're right. We apologize."

"And you want to be a searcher."
"It's my life's dream," he said. "My father was a searcher. And my Uncle Ferdinand ... the statue you saw back there—"

Perseus stiffened again, remembering his own encounter with Medusa.

"Oh, right, sorry."

Grover shook his head. "Uncle Ferdinand knew the risks. So did my dad. But I'll succeed. I'll be the first searcher to return alive."

"Just to return alive?" Jason asked in disbelief.

"Searching with monsters in every corner of the world is a dangerous task. Not to mention, the satyrs purposefully go to places that have a lot of magic, hoping that's where they'll find Pan." Nico pointed out.

"Magic means more monsters. Dangerous ones." Jason connected understanding. "Satyrs are really brave."

"Hang on—the first?"

Grover took his reed pipes out of his pocket. "No searcher has ever come back. Once they set out, they disappear. They're never seen alive again."

"Not once in two thousand years?"

"In two thousand years? That soon?" Hestia sounded faint, her unhappiness at potentially losing a member of her family so quickly showing.

"No."

"And your dad? You have no idea what happened to him?"

"None."

"But you still want to go," I said, amazed. "I mean, you really think you'll be the one to find Pan?"

"What's that supposed to mean? Way to have no faith in him Percy." Thalia said defensively.

"Hey, I had faith. I was just amazed at his conviction!"

"Big word." Percy just glared back at her.

"I have to believe that, Percy. Every searcher does. It's the only thing that keeps us from despair when we look at what humans have done to the world. I have to believe Pan can still be awakened."

Hermes had a wild look in his eyes. "Does he? Does he find my son?"

Percy and Nico looked at each other and hesitated. Then Percy took in a deep breath and nodded firmly. "He does, Lord Hermes but we can't tell you anything about what happens once he did."

"The Fates probably forbid it," Demeter cut in, seeing Hermes about to unleash his wrath. She could
understand how he was feeling, the worry for one's child was quite overwhelming. At the same time, this particular future was already written they just had to now prevent it from occurring.

I stared at the orange haze of the sky and tried to understand how Grover could pursue a dream that seemed so hopeless. Then again, was I any better?

"How are we going to get into the Underworld?" I asked him. "I mean, what chance do we have against a god?"

"None." Most gods and demigods present chimed. Percy rolled his eyes, smirking inwardly.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But back at Medusa's, when you were searching her office? Annabeth was telling me..."

"Oh, I forgot. Annabeth will have a plan all figured out."

"Having a plan isn't a bad thing," Athena defended.

"No. It certainly isn't," Percy agreed surprising the wisdom goddess. She nodded at him and leaned back in her throne contemplating his odd behaviour.

"Don't be so hard on her, Percy. She's had a tough life, but she's a good person. After all, she forgave me..." His voice faltered.

Thalia growled. Percy, Nico and Jason all inched away.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Forgave you for what?"

Suddenly, Grover seemed very interested in playing notes on his pipes.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Your first keeper job was five years ago. Annabeth has been at camp five years. She wasn't ... I mean, your first assignment that went wrong—"

"It didn't go wrong!"

"Er..Thalia? It kind of...did."

Thalia glared, "it wasn't his fault though."

"No. It most definitely wasn't," Nico agreed knowing the truth behind everything. Percy glanced at Nico, knowing he needed to talk to the younger boy so he didn't bottle everything inside himself.

"I can't talk about it," Grover said, and his quivering lower lip suggested he'd start crying if I pressed him.

The look of death that Thalia gave Percy was noticed by everyone there. Percy glared back offended she'd think he'd ever do something to cause Grover to cry.

"But as I was saying, back at Medusa's, Annabeth and I agreed there's something strange going on with this quest. Something isn't what it seems."

"Well, duh. I'm getting blamed for stealing a thunderbolt that Hades took."

Hades growled. He was sick and tired of being blamed for everything that went wrong in the
"That's not what I mean," Grover said. "The Fur—The Kindly Ones were sort of holding back. Like Mrs. Dodds at Yancy Academy... why did she wait so long to try to kill you? Then on the bus, they just weren't as aggressive as they could've been."

Alecto sniffed. "I agree. We could've killed you faster than you could blink had we wanted to."

"They seemed plenty aggressive to me."

Grover shook his head. "They were screeching at us: 'Where is it? Where?'

Hades froze. "It?" He questioned and his wife gave him a confused glance.

"You'll see Lord Hades," was all Percy said.

"Asking about me," I said.

"Maybe... but Annabeth and I, we both got the feeling they weren't asking about a person. They said 'Where is it?' They seemed to be asking about an object."

"What object would you care about, Uncle?" Ares asked smirking.

Hades paled not even reacting to the nickname. "You don't mean...?"

"Don't worry. It all ends up okay," Percy quickly reassured the Lord of the Dead, who ironically enough, was looking quite ghost like himself.

"That doesn't make sense."

"I know. But if we've misunderstood something about this quest, and we only have nine days to find the master bolt..." He looked at me like he was hoping for answers, but I didn't have any.

"Percy and answers? Grover really was delusional," Thalia laughed.

"Shut up Thalia. I can give answers to people!"

"Sure you can Perce. Sure you can."

I thought about what Medusa had said: I was being used by the gods. What lay ahead of me was worse than petrification. "I haven't been straight with you," I told Grover. "I don't care about the master bolt. I agreed to go to the Underworld so I could bring back my mother."

Demeter had tears in her eyes. "Now Percy is a good son. Your mother is so lucky."

Persephone rolled her eyes and Percy himself looked quite unsure about the compliment.

Grover blew a soft note on his pipes. "I know that, Percy. But are you sure that's the only reason?"

"I'm not doing it to help my father. He doesn't care about me. I don't care about him."

Poseidon flinched slightly and Amphitrite didn't know if those words pleased her or made her feel
sorry for her husband. Triton obviously looked quite overjoyed, but to have one's son hate you...She didn't know. Even her cheating husband didn't deserve that.

Grover gazed down from his tree branch. "Look, Percy, I'm not as smart as Annabeth. I'm not as brave as you. But I'm pretty good at reading emotions. You're glad your dad is alive. You feel good that he's claimed you, and part of you wants to make him proud. That's why you mailed Medusa's head to Olympus. You wanted him to notice what you'd done."

"Oh that was not why," Percy blurted out.

"We know. You were angry and being stupid," Theseus agreed.

Perseus shot Percy a dark look muttering in agreement with Theseus and something about giving him a heart attack. Percy felt guilty but then remembered that it wasn't exactly his fault they had to read his memories.

"Yeah? Well maybe satyr emotions work differently than human emotions. Because you're wrong. I don't care what he thinks."

Grover pulled his feet up onto the branch. "Okay, Percy. Whatever."

"Grover just realized it was pointless arguing with you.

"Besides, I haven't done anything worth bragging about. We barely got out of New York and we're stuck here with no money and no way west."

Grover looked at the night sky, like he was thinking about that problem. "How about I take first watch, huh? You get some sleep."

I wanted to protest, but he started to play Mozart, soft and sweet, and I turned away, my eyes stinging. After a few bars of Piano Concerto no. 12, I was asleep.

Apollo looked vaguely interested but annoyed at the same time. Realizing that the god of music probably just wanted to hear the song, Thalia promised to show it to him during their next break.

In my dreams, I stood in a dark cavern before a gaping pit. Gray mist creatures churned all around me, whispering rags of smoke that I somehow knew were the spirits of the dead.

They tugged at my clothes, trying to pull me back, but I felt compelled to walk forward to the very edge of the chasm.

Everyone present except for the future demigods, paled. "You were pulled towards Tartarus?"

Persephone choked out.

Percy's own face turned tormented from his memories of the place. He gave a quick nod and motioned for the reading to continue to escape the flashes that haunted him.

Looking down made me dizzy.

The pit yawned so wide and was so completely black, I knew it must be bottomless. Yet I had a feeling that something was trying to rise from the abyss, something huge and evil.

Percy's face grew paler and his eyes closed as the screams echoed in his ears.
The little hero, an amused voice echoed far down in the darkness. Too weak, too young, but perhaps you will do.

"Kronos," Hera whispered fearfully and the room immediately grew darker.

"No! It wasn't him!" Zeus denied immediately. Percy growled and only the Fates' warning to not reveal the truth prematurely prevented him from giving Zeus a piece of his mind.

The voice felt ancient—cold and heavy. It wrapped around me like sheets of lead.

They have misled you, boy, it said. Barter with me. I will give you what you want.

"Who else would it be?" Hestia asked, her own time in Kronos' stomach coming back to her.

Zeus shook his head, not wanting to believe Kronos could still end up being a problem. Ouranos never had been, and Zeus had only done the same to Kronos as he did to Ouranos.

A shimmering image hovered over the void: my mother, frozen at the moment she’d dissolved in a shower of gold. Her face was distorted with pain, as if the Minotaur were still squeezing her neck. Her eyes looked directly at me, pleading: Go!

Percy choked on air. That image had never truly left him, constantly appearing in his dreams. Nico squeezed his hand before abruptly pulling away, Percy was still thankful knowing Nico knew what the pain of losing a loved one felt like.

I tried to cry out, but my voice wouldn't work.

Cold laughter echoed from the chasm.

An invisible force pulled me forward. It would drag me into the pit unless I stood firm.

Help me rise, boy. The voice became hungrier. Bring me the bolt. Strike a blow against the treacherous gods!

"You still deny it brother?" Poseidon demanded. Zeus clenched his jaw and refused to speak.

The spirits of the dead whispered around me, No! Wake!

The image of my mother began to fade. The thing in the pit tightened its unseen grip around me.

Hades nodded. "It can be no other. I'm sure that he is the one causing all of this."

Zeus snapped. "Stop it! Its not happening today! Stop!"

The other gods all looked at Zeus worriedly and decided it probably was for the best to stop right now.

I realized it wasn't interested in pulling me in. It was using me to pull itself out.

Good, it murmured. Good.

Wake! the dead whispered. Wake!
"Percy!" Nico shouted and caused Jason to jump. They all turned to look at the boy who was struggling to stay conscious. Poseidon waved his hand and a water was dumped on him, causing Percy to startle back to life.

"Are you okay?" Orion demanded. Percy nodded shakily.

Perseus narrowed his eyes. That hadn't seemed like normal behavior and judging by Thalia's dark look it wasn't.

Someone was shaking me.

My eyes opened, and it was daylight.

"Well," Annabeth said, "the zombie lives."

I was trembling from the dream. I could still feel the grip of the chasm monster around my chest.

The five children of Kronos who had been eaten by their father also shuddered. If Percy Jackson was right about anything it was the fact that Kronos was a monster. And if they all privately thought Zeus was more the King of Denial than the King of the Gods? Well they wouldn't mention anything at the moment.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Long enough for me to cook breakfast." Annabeth tossed me a bag of nacho-flavored corn chips from Aunty Em's snack bar. "And Grover went exploring. Look, he found a friend."

"A friend?" Hercules asked uneasily. On a quest, no one was a friend.

Percy smiled in amusement however, that had been a good memory.

My eyes had trouble focusing.

Grover was sitting cross-legged on a blanket with something fuzzy in his lap, a dirty, unnaturally pink stuffed animal.

Artemis, Thalia and Zoë all looked righteously horrified having an innate feeling that it was no stuffed animal.

No. It wasn't a stuffed animal. It was a pink poodle.

"Poodles aren't pink," Jason said bemused.

"No, they aren't," Thalia said with gritted teeth.

The poodle yapped at me suspiciously. Grover said, "No, he's not."

I blinked. "Are you...talking to that thing?"

She slapped Percy upside the head.

"Sorry!" The son of the sea god yelped.

The poodle growled.
"This thing," Grover warned, "is our ticket west. Be nice to him."

"You can talk to animals?"

"Satyrs can talk to animals?" Jason asked in surprise, "fauns never showed that ability," he muttered quietly.

Percy shrugged at him not knowing how to respond.


I stared at Annabeth, figuring she'd crack up at this practical joke they were playing on me, but she looked deadly serious.

"I'm not saying hello to a pink poodle," I said. "Forget it."

"It won't hurt you right?" Ariadne asked. Percy nodded. "Then why not say hello to the poodle?"

Ariadne looked genuinely confused and Percy groaned.

"Percy," Annabeth said. "I said hello to the poodle. You say hello to the poodle."

The poodle growled.

I said hello to the poodle.

"You were scared of a poodle? A pink poodle?" Jason started.

"Shut up," Percy didn't let him finish.

Grover explained that he'd come across Gladiola in the woods and they'd struck up a conversation. The poodle had run away from a rich local family, who'd posted a $200 reward for his return. Gladiola didn't really want to go back to his family, but he was willing to if it meant helping Grover.

Aphrodite giggled and the others all leaned away from the deranged love goddess. "What?" She snapped when she noticed. "I'm stuck here without anyone to match make. My mind is wandering okay?"

They all nodded honestly a little scared. They'd rather she think about impossible love in the book than about any of them anyway.

"How does Gladiola know about the reward?" I asked.

"He read the signs," Grover said. "Duh."

"Of course," I said. "Silly me."

"It's not that silly. Or it wouldn't be had you not been a boy," Zoë said. Percy simply stared at her in annoyance.

"So we turn in Gladiola," Annabeth explained in her best strategy voice, "we get money, and we buy tickets to Los Angeles. Simple."
I thought about my dream—the whispering voices of the dead, the thing in the chasm, and my mother's face, shimmering as it dissolved into gold. All that might be waiting for me in the West.

The book was giving everyone but Percy anxiety. The idea of him falling into more danger seemed dangerous to their health.

"Not another bus," I said warily.

"No," Annabeth agreed.

She pointed downhill, toward train tracks I hadn't been able to see last night in the dark. "There's an Amtrak station half a mile that way. According to Gladiola, the westbound train leaves at noon."

"And that's the end of the chapter," Orion stammered. "Who wants to read next?" Alecto smirked, stretched then flew over to Orion. There she grabbed the book out of his hand with her talons, before returning to her place on top of Hades' throne. Thalia and several others were still concerned about Percy, but they all agreed that continuing to read was probably the best idea for now.

In a honey-like voice, which reminded both Percy and Nico of Mrs. Dodds about two millenium early, she crooned...I Plunge to My Death
We spent two days on the Amtrak train, heading west through hills, over rivers, past amber waves of grain.

"Waves of amber grain? That sounds beautiful," Demeter sighed her mind conjuring images of the lovely grain.

We weren't attacked once, but I didn't relax. I felt that we were traveling around in a display case, being watched from above and maybe from below, that something was waiting for the right opportunity.


I tried to keep a low profile because my name and picture were splattered over the front pages of several East Coast newspapers.

"What?" Zeus questioned, flabbergasted.

"Newspapers, are papers that are sold to let everyone know the news."

"That is a lot of paper," Dionysus remarked.

"Yup."

The Trenton Register-News showed a photo taken by a tourist as I got off the Greyhound bus. I had a wild look in my eyes. My sword was a metallic blur in my hands. It might've been a baseball bat or a lacrosse stick.

"The Mist," Triton remembered.


The picture's caption read:

Twelve-year-old Percy Jackson, wanted for questioning in the Long Island disappearance of his mother two weeks ago, is shown here fleeing from the bus where he accosted several elderly female passengers. The bus exploded on an east New Jersey roadside shortly after Jackson fled the scene. Based on eyewitness accounts, police believe the boy may be traveling with two teenage accomplices. His stepfather, Gabe Ugliano, has offered a cash reward for information leading to his capture.
"That pig is willing to give up money for you?" Zoë asked in surprise.

Percy glanced at her, "Yeah. He really hates me. Like a lot of hate."

"Don't worry," Annabeth told me. "Mortal police could never find us." But she didn't sound so sure.

The rest of the day I spent alternately pacing the length of the train (because I had a really hard time sitting still) or looking out the windows.

Once, I spotted a family of centaurs galloping across a wheat field, bows at the ready, as they hunted lunch. The little boy centaur, who was the size of a second-grader on a pony, caught my eye and waved.

"Not the Party Ponies then," Hercules remarked.

"No. Not them."

I looked around the passenger car, but nobody else had noticed. The adult riders all had their faces buried in laptop computers or magazines.

Another time, toward evening, I saw something huge moving through the woods. I could've sworn it was a lion, except that lions don't live wild in America, and this thing was the size of a Hummer. Its fur glinted gold in the evening light. Then it leaped through the trees and was gone.

Hercules and Zoë both stiffened. "The Nemean Lion," she grit out.

Percy nodded. "I saw him, but I didn't fight him then."

Theseus narrowed his eyes, catching the selective wording. He decided to question Percy about it later though. A look at Perseus showed he had the same idea.

Our reward money for returning Gladiola the poodle had only been enough to purchase tickets as far as Denver. We couldn't get berths in the sleeper car, so we dozed in our seats. My neck got stiff. I tried not to drool in my sleep, since Annabeth was sitting right next to me.

"Oh, is that so?" Aphrodite teased.

"It wasn't like that at all," Percy denied, a bored tone in his voice. Aphrodite pouted.

Grover kept snoring and bleating and waking me up. Once, he shuffled around and his fake foot fell off. Annabeth and I had to stick it back on before any of the other passengers noticed.

"Satyrs are wonderful," Hermes said, his voice breaking a little. Everyone looked sadly at him, especially Demeter. She knew the pain of losing a child. She let her immortal magic reach out to Hermes, in support and he looked at her gratefully. Hestia smiled, seeing her family be a family.

"So," Annabeth asked me, once we'd gotten Grover's sneaker readjusted. "Who wants your help?"

"What do you mean?"
"When you were asleep just now, you mumbled, 'I won't help you.' Who were you dreaming about?"

I was reluctant to say anything. It was the second time I'd dreamed about the evil voice from the pit.

They all shuddered. Nico and Thalia each grasped one of Percy's shoulders in support.

But it bothered me so much I finally told her.

Annabeth was quiet for a long time. "That doesn't sound like Hades. He always appears on a black throne, and he never laughs."

Hades looked affronted. "I do so laugh."

Persephone patted his arm, "Of course dear."

"I have a great sense of humor!"

"I agree."

Hades glared at the book. Persephone hid a laugh.

"He offered my mother in trade. Who else could do that?"

Hades grumbled. "No one should be able to."

Percy frowned, "What about Thanatos?"

Hades glared, "He can too, I suppose." From the look on Persephone, Nico and the other Furies' faces it was clear to see that Hades hated the fact that Thanatos too had that power.

"I guess ... if he meant, 'Help me rise from the Underworld.' If he wants war with the Olympians. But why ask you to bring him the master bolt if he already has it?"

"Again, why would I have the..." Hades began to rant once more.

"Stop it!" Hera commanded. "That is why we are reading. Stop interrupting!" Hades stopped talking but his eyes glittered with anger and irritation.

I shook my head, wishing I knew the answer. I thought about what Grover had told me, that the Furies on the bus seemed to have been looking for something.

Hades blanched. Behind him, Tisiphone hissed.

Where is it? Where?

Maybe Grover sensed my emotions. He snorted in his sleep, muttered something about vegetables, and turned his head.

Annabeth readjusted his cap so it covered his horns. "Percy, you can't barter with Hades. You know that, right? He's deceitful, heartless, and greedy. I don't care if his Kindly Ones weren't as aggressive this time—"
Hades and his Kindly Ones growled. "That girl! How dare she!"

Demeter sniffed, "She isn't wrong."

Hades glared at her venomously.

"This time?" I asked. "You mean you've run into them before?"

Her hand crept up to her necklace. She fingered a glazed white bead painted with the image of a pine tree, one of her clay end-of-summer tokens. "Let's just say I've got no love for the Lord of the Dead. You can't be tempted to make a deal for your mom."

They all glanced at Percy, who had a far away look in his eyes. Nico and Thalia both knew that Sally was fine and even got married to Paul Blofis long after all this, but they didn't understand how.

"What would you do if it was your dad?"

"That's easy," she said. "I'd leave him to rot."

"What?" Zeus said in surprise.

"I'd do the same," Zoë shrugged. Percy, Thalia and Artemis all knew that Zoë's father was Atlas so they weren't all that surprised by the hate in her voice.

"You're not serious?"

Annabeth's gray eyes fixed on me. She wore the same expression she'd worn in the woods at camp, the moment she drew her sword against the hellhound. "My dad's resented me since the day I was born, Percy," she said. "He never wanted a baby. When he got me, he asked Athena to take me back and raise me on Olympus because he was too busy with his work.

Demeter and Hermes were both immediately outraged. "He has the chance to be with his child all the time and he'd rather do work?" Hermes sneered, his own pain of potentially losing Pan showing through.

"He has no idea how lucky he is," Demeter agreed angrily.

Thalia felt compelled to stay silent, though she wanted to explain that things got better between Annabeth and her father.

She wasn't happy about that. She told him heroes had to be raised by their mortal parent."

"But how ... I mean, I guess you weren't born in a hospital..."

"I appeared on my father's doorstep, in a golden cradle, carried down from Olympus by Zephyr the West Wind."

Apollo whistled. "Of course your kids would make an entrance Thena. I remember you, popping out with full battle armour."

Athena stared at him, "You weren't there when I was born."

"Don't be silly, little sis. Of course I was."

Athena's expression screamed confusion and irritation. Artemis sighed, "Welcome to my world."
As Artemis spoke, Apollo immediately retreated, refusing to speak any further.

"You'd think my dad would remember that as a miracle, right? Like, maybe he'd take some
digital photos or something. But he always talked about my arrival as if it were the most
inconvenient thing that had ever happened to him. When I was five he got married and totally
forgot about Athena. He got a 'regular' mortal wife, and had two 'regular' mortal kids, and
tried to pretend I didn't exist."

"Why do mortals do that?" Zeus questioned

"You mean mortals who have had your children?" Hera scowled.

"Yeah! It's so annoying!"

"Those kids are so lucky, rather," Hercules whispered to Perseus who looked sympathetic yet
uncomfortable.

I stared out the train window. The lights of a sleeping town were drifting by. I wanted to make
Annabeth feel better, but I didn't know how.

"My mom married a really awful guy," I told her. "Grover said she did it to protect me, to
hide me in the scent of a human family. Maybe that's what your dad was thinking."

"It wasn't," Thalia replied.

"I know," Percy said sadly.

Annabeth kept worrying at her necklace. She was pinching the gold college ring that hung
with the beads. It occurred to me that the ring must be her father's. I wondered why she wore
it if she hated him so much.

"I assume it's complicated?" Dionysus drawled. Percy and Thalia both nodded.

"He doesn't care about me," she said. "His wife—my stepmom—treated me like a freak. She
wouldn't let me play with her children. My dad went along with her. Whenever something
dangerous happened—you know, something with monsters—they would both look at me
resentfully, like, 'How dare you put our family at risk.' Finally, I took the hint. I wasn't
wanted. I ran away."

Hermes and Demeter scowled.

Annoyed Percy spoke up, "You guys shouldn't be mad, considering that's exactly how you treat
your demigod children."

"How old were you?"

"Same age as when I started camp. Seven."

"That old?"

"That young?"

Jason and Nico asked respectively. Nico turned to Jason bemused. "I started at the age of three,"
Jason defended.
"That's because you're different. In a good way," Percy teased. Nico clenched his jaw.

"But ... you couldn't have gotten all the way to Half-Blood Hill by yourself."

"Not alone, no. Athena watched over me, guided me toward help. I made a couple of unexpected friends who took care of me, for a short time, anyway."

Thalia got a sad, far away look in her eyes.

I wanted to ask what happened, but Annabeth seemed lost in sad memories. So I listened to the sound of Grover snoring and gazed out the train windows as the dark fields of Ohio raced by.

Toward the end of our second day on the train, June 13, eight days before the summer solstice, we passed through some golden hills and over the Mississippi River into St. Louis. Annabeth craned her neck to see the Gateway Arch, which looked to me like a huge shopping bag handle stuck on the city.

The futures all turned to look at Percy. "I don't care about architecture!" He defended himself.

"I want to do that," she sighed.

"What?" I asked.

"Build something like that. You ever see the Parthenon, Percy?"

"It's so beautiful," Athena sighed. The others agreed.

"Only in pictures."

"Someday, I'm going to see it in person. I'm going to build the greatest monument to the gods, ever. Something that'll last a thousand years."


I laughed. "You? An architect?"

I don't know why, but I found it funny. Just the idea of Annabeth trying to sit quietly and draw all day.

"She has ADHD, that's hard for most demigods," Percy explained.

"Most?" Thalia rose an eyebrow.

Percy and Jason exchanged grins, thinking of Reyna and nodded in response to Thalia.

Her cheeks flushed. "Yes, an architect. Athena expects her children to create things, not just tear them down, like a certain god of earthquakes I could mention."

Poseidon growled. "Like you've never torn anything down?"

"I didn't say anything," Athena protested.

I watched the churning brown water of the Mississippi below.
"Sorry," Annabeth said. "That was mean."

"Can't we work together a little?" I pleaded. "I mean, didn't Athena and Poseidon ever cooperate?"

The duo looked at each other and leaned away. "Not if I can help it," both muttered.

Annabeth had to think about it. "I guess ... the chariot," she said tentatively. "My mom invented it, but Poseidon created horses out of the crests of waves. So they had to work together to make it complete."

"Technically, I don't have to," Poseidon countered.

Athena threw up her hands.

"Then we can cooperate, too. Right?"

We rode into the city, Annabeth watching as the Arch disappeared behind a hotel.

"I suppose," she said at last.

"Sounds like hard work," Persephone wondered.

"It is!" Athena, Poseidon and Triton snapped. They all looked at Triton's rage filled face and quieted.

We pulled into the Amtrak station downtown. The intercom told us we'd have a three-hour layover before departing for Denver.

Grover stretched. Before he was even fully awake, he said, "Food."

Hermes smiled, a shaky smile.

"Come on, goat boy," Annabeth said. "Sightseeing."

"Sightseeing?"

"That's the time to sightsee?" Jason asked bewilderedly. The other demigods all nodded, despite the gods glaring.

"The Gateway Arch," she said. "This may be my only chance to ride to the top. Are you coming or not?"

Grover and I exchanged looks.

I wanted to say no, but I figured that if Annabeth was going, we couldn't very well let her go alone.

"Architecture is boring. To me...Don't tell Annabeth I said that?" Percy sighed.

Nico, Jason and Thalia all struggled to not laugh.

Grover shrugged. "As long as there's a snack bar without monsters."

Thalia and Percy looked at each other, Zoë and burst out laughing.
"What is it?" Zoë demanded.

"You'll see," Thalia gasped between laughs.

The Arch was about a mile from the train station. Late in the day the lines to get in weren't that long. We threaded our way through the underground museum, looking at covered wagons and other junk from the 1800s. It wasn't all that thrilling, but Annabeth kept telling us interesting facts about how the Arch was built, and Grover kept passing me jelly beans, so I was okay.

"Would you like a jelly baby?" Percy asked.

Nico shook his head, "Not as good without the scarf."

Percy rolled his eyes, "I'm improvising here."

I kept looking around, though, at the other people in line. "You smell anything?" I murmured to Grover.

He took his nose out of the jelly-bean bag long enough to sniff.

"Grover and candy," Thalia shook her head.

"Don't let Juniper know," Percy laughed. Thalia grinned.

"Juniper?" Persephone questioned.

"His girlfriend. In the book Grover's future."

"Underground," he said distastefully. "Underground air always smells like monsters. Probably doesn't mean anything."

All of the past heroes groaned. That sort of thinking never meant anything good.

But something felt wrong to me. I had a feeling we shouldn't be here.

"Guys," I said. "You know the gods' symbols of power?"

"Here comes the lecture," Ares groaned. Hephaestus shot him a nasty look, but he remained quiet.

Annabeth had been in the middle of reading about the construction equipment used to build the Arch, but she looked over. "Yeah?"

"Well, Hade—"

Grover cleared his throat. "We're in a public place... You mean, our friend downstairs?"

"Um, right," I said. "Our friend way downstairs. Doesn't he have a hat like Annabeth's?"

"Excuse me? Are you insane? My Helm is a million, not a trillion times more incredible than that little girl's hat," Hades raged.

"You mean the Helm of Darkness," Annabeth said. "Yeah, that's his symbol of power. I saw it next to his seat during the winter solstice council meeting."
"He was there?" I asked.

"I know. Shocking right?" Hades asked bitterly causing Hestia to wince.

She nodded. "It's the only time he's allowed to visit Olympus—the darkest day of the year.

Hades growled quietly and Persephone took his arm, offering him, her comfort.

But his helm is a lot more powerful than my invisibility hat, if what I've heard is true..."

"It allows him to become darkness," Grover confirmed. "He can melt into shadow or pass through walls. He can't be touched, or seen, or heard. And he can radiate fear so intense it can drive you insane or stop your heart. Why do you think all rational creatures fear the dark?"

"But then ... how do we know he's not here right now, watching us?" I asked.

"As I have better things to do with my time than to watch insufferable demigods," Hades drawled irritably. Dionysus toasted silently to Hades' words, much to Ariadne's amusement and disappointment.

Annabeth and Grover exchanged looks.

"We don't," Grover said.

"Thanks, that makes me feel a lot better," I said. "Got any blue jelly beans left?"

Zeus smiled proudly. Blue was his colour more than Poseidon's after all. The future demigods who saw him, grew rather worried. This was the King of the Gods; Ruler of All? They were doomed. How were the gods always more concerned with their petty problems over real, world-threatening ones? The gods were like teenagers. Moody, emo teenagers.

"Hey kind of like Nico!" Thalia suggested brightly, knowing that Percy, Nico and Jason were all thinking along the same lines as her.

Nico protested silently, glowering at her viciously.

I'd almost mastered my jumpy nerves when I saw the tiny little elevator car we were going to ride to the top of the Arch, and I knew I was in trouble. I hate confined places. They make me nuts.

We got shoehorned into the car with this big fat lady and her dog, a Chihuahua with a rhinestone collar. I figured maybe the dog was a seeing-eye Chihuahua, because none of the guards said a word about it.

"What's with the Chihuahua?" Perseus asked wearily. Percy looked at his namesake in confusion.

"Every time you notice something supposedly mundane, it ends up in an attack," Theseus clarified.

We started going up, inside the Arch. I'd never been in an elevator that went in a curve, and my stomach wasn't too happy about it.

"No parents?" the fat lady asked us.

She had beady eyes; pointy, coffee-stained teeth; a floppy denim hat, and a denim dress that
bulged so much, she looked like a blue-jean blimp.

"They're below," Annabeth told her. "Scared of heights."

"Now that's a good excuse. I mean; orphans in the circus?" Jason laughed. Percy shoved him playfully and Nico felt sick to his stomach.

"Oh, the poor darlings."

The Chihuahua growled. The woman said, "Now, now, sonny. Behave." The dog had beady eyes like its owner, intelligent and vicious.

I said, "Sonny. Is that his name?"

Perseus, Orion and Theseus all groaned. Peace for Percy was all that they wanted. Was that so much to ask for?

"No," the lady told me.

She smiled, as if that cleared everything up.

At the top of the Arch, the observation deck reminded me of a tin can with carpeting. Rows of tiny windows looked out over the city on one side and the river on the other. The view was okay, but if there's anything I like less than a confined space, it's a confined space six hundred feet in the air. I was ready to go pretty quick.

"Please? Before reading further kills Theseus and Perseus?" Orion basically pleaded. He was worried about Percy too, but those two appeared to be gaining ulcers hearing about Percy's adventures. And they were only on the first of the books.

Annabeth kept talking about structural supports, and how she would've made the windows bigger, and designed a see-through floor. She probably could've stayed up there for hours, but luckily for me the park ranger announced that the observation deck would be closing in a few minutes.

I steered Grover and Annabeth toward the exit, loaded them into the elevator, and I was about to get in myself when I realized there were already two other tourists inside. No room for me.

"No!" Came the simultaneous cry. Percy awkwardly cleared his throat, "Um guys? I'm still here. This was in the past for me."

Both Theseus and Perseus only looked at Percy mournfully, as if they could clearly see the burning of his shroud. Percy looked away, a little scared.

The park ranger said, "Next car, sir."

"We'll get out," Annabeth said. "We'll wait with you."

But that was going to mess everybody up and take even more time, so I said, "Naw, it's okay. I'll see you guys at the bottom."

"You idiot!" Thalia slapped him on the head. When Percy looked around, it appeared as though
everyone approved of Thalia's actions.

Grover and Annabeth both looked nervous, but they let the elevator door slide shut. Their car disappeared down the ramp.

Now the only people left on the observation deck were me, a little boy with his parents, the park ranger, and the fat lady with her Chihuahua.

I smiled uneasily at the fat lady. She smiled back, her forked tongue flickering between her teeth.

Wait a minute.

Forked tongue?

"Do you get out of there without a fight?" Hercules asked straight forwardly. Percy shook his head. "Okay. Perseus, Theseus stop having nervous breakdowns," he commanded. "Percy gets out of there alive and your worrying is helping no one."

Slowly registering Hercules' words, both stopped fidgeting in their panic and anxiety over Percy's fate. Percy nodded at Hercules; he was thankful but Hercules wasn't exactly a friend of his.

Before I could decide if I'd really seen that, her Chihuahua jumped down and started yapping at me.

"Now, now, sonny," the lady said. "Does this look like a good time? We have all these nice people here."

"Doggie!" said the little boy. "Look, a doggie!"

His parents pulled him back.

"Oh thank the gods," Demeter sighed in relief. Mortals, especially mortal children, were far too often caught in the monster attacks.

The Chihuahua bared his teeth at me, foam dripping from his black lips.

"Well, son," the fat lady sighed. "If you insist."

Ice started forming in my stomach. "Urn, did you just call that Chihuahua your son?"

"Chimera, dear," the fat lady corrected. "Not a Chihuahua. It's an easy mistake to make."

"A CHIMERA!?" The yell sent vibrations throughout the room. Most likely as everyone but Percy had yelled.

"You killed a Chimera? At twelve?" Jason was impressed.

Percy laughed, "Don't be ridiculous. That's impossible. I just escaped."

She rolled up her denim sleeves, revealing that the skin of her arms was scaly and green. When she smiled, I saw that her teeth were fangs. The pupils of her eyes were sideways slits, like a reptile's.
The Chihuahua barked louder, and with each bark, it grew. First to the size of a Doberman, then to a lion. The bark became a roar.

The little boy screamed. His parents pulled him back toward the exit, straight into the park ranger, who stood, paralyzed, gaping at the monster.

The Chimera was now so tall its back rubbed against the roof. It had the head of a lion with a blood-caked mane, the body and hooves of a giant goat, and a serpent for a tail, a ten-foot-long diamondback growing right out of its shaggy behind. The rhinestone dog collar still hung around its neck, and the plate-sized dog tag was now easy to read: CHIMERA—RABID, FIRE-BREATHING, POISONOUS—IF FOUND, PLEASE CALL TARTARUS—EXT. 954.

"Well did you?"

"Did I what?"

Hades huffed, annoyed that he had to clarify. "Call Tartarus about the Chimera?" Percy gaped at Hades, utterly astounded.

I realized I hadn't even uncapped my sword. My hands were numb. I was ten feet away from the Chimera's bloody maw, and I knew that as soon as I moved, the creature would lunge.

The snake lady made a hissing noise that might've been laughter. "Be honored, Percy Jackson. Lord Zeus rarely allows me to test a hero with one of my brood. For I am the Mother of Monsters, the terrible Echidna!"

"Why does everyone hate you?" Theseus asked tearfully.

"He's right. Echidna? She normally doesn't attack heroes. No matter what, and you've been in our world for less than a month. Lord Zeus must truly believe the accusations on you were true," Zoë told him, in a factual tone.

Surprised by her worry for him, Percy could merely nod in agreement.

I stared at her. All I could think to say was: "Isn't that a kind of anteater?"

She howled, her reptilian face turning brown and green with rage. "I hate it when people say that! I hate Australia! Naming that ridiculous animal after me. For that, Percy Jackson, my son shall destroy you!"

"Well now you've done it Seaweed Brain," Thalia shook her head at him.

"Hey, I survived okay?"

" Barely, I'm sure," Nico muttered and Percy stared at him as if Nico had kicked his puppy.

The Chimera charged, its lion teeth gnashing. I managed to leap aside and dodge the bite.

I ended up next to the family and the park ranger, who were all screaming now, trying to pry open the emergency exit doors.

I couldn't let them get hurt. I uncapped my sword, ran to the other side of the deck, and
yelled, "Hey, Chihuahua!" The Chimera turned faster than I would've thought possible.

"You are far nobler than I'd have thought Percy Jackson. Your selflessness is bountiful," Hera said, shocked to her core. Very few heroes put their lives at risk against a monster they have no hope of defeating just to save some mortals. Percy nodded his thanks to her compliment.

Before I could swing my sword, it opened its mouth, emitting a stench like the world's largest barbecue pit, and shot a column of flame straight at me.

I dove through the explosion. The carpet burst into flames; the heat was so intense, it nearly seared off my eyebrows.

"The fire of the Chimera is like no other. Not even children of the sea can withstand it," Triton spoke up, staring at Percy so hard, it seemed as if though he were trying to read his soul.

Where I had been standing a moment before was a ragged hole in the side of the Arch, with melted metal steaming around the edges.

Great, I thought. We just blowtorched a national monument.


Riptide was now a shining bronze blade in my hands, and as the Chimera turned, I slashed at its neck.

That was my fatal mistake.

"Fatal?" Orion squeaked. His eyes widened when he realized he had, but his worry didn't diminish.

"Still alive," Percy reminded once more.

The blade sparked harmlessly off the dog collar. I tried to regain my balance, but I was so worried about defending myself against the fiery lion's mouth, I completely forgot about the serpent tail until it whipped around and sank its fangs into my calf.

My whole leg was on fire. I tried to jab Riptide into the Chimera's mouth, but the serpent tail wrapped around my ankles and pulled me off balance, and my blade flew out of my hand, spinning out of the hole in the Arch and down toward the Mississippi River.

"Why aren't you dead exactly? You've been poisoned and lost your weapon," Ares questioned idly. He could care less about the answer, though he was slightly curious.

Amphitrite put it together first. "The Mississippi River," she stated. Percy nodded. Some like Athena understood, others were still highly confused.

I managed to get to my feet, but I knew I had lost. I was weaponless. I could feel deadly poison racing up to my chest. I remembered Chiron saying that Anaklusmos would always return to me, but there was no pen in my pocket. Maybe it had fallen too far away. Maybe it only returned when it was in pen form. I didn't know, and I wasn't going to live long enough to figure it out.

"Weapons can be unreliable. You have to have some training in your magical powers," Hephaestus spoke gruffly, startling those around him.
I backed into the hole in the wall. The Chimera advanced, growling, smoke curling from its lips. The snake lady, Echidna, cackled. "They don't make heroes like they used to, eh, son?"

"Echidna, daughter of Styx, wife of Typhoon. Once she was revered and all heroes feared her, now she hunts children. My, how the mighty have fallen," Artemis sneered.

"He's a boy, what do you care?" Apollo questioned her coolly, causing the moon goddess to flinch.

The monster growled. It seemed in no hurry to finish me off now that I was beaten.

I glanced at the park ranger and the family. The little boy was hiding behind his father's legs. I had to protect these people. I couldn't just ... die. I tried to think, but my whole body was on fire. My head felt dizzy. I had no sword. I was facing a massive, fire-breathing monster and its mother. And I was scared.

"Honest," Hestia murmured, impressed despite herself. She watched Percy carefully, though the book was causing plenty of arguments and heartache, Hestia believed that it just may be the key to bringing her dysfunctional family together again.

There was no place else to go, so I stepped to the edge of the hole. Far, far below, the river glittered.

If I died, would the monsters go away? Would they leave the humans alone?

"You would die, so that others may live. You'd make a great praetor," Jason finally acknowledged, knowing that Percy truly did have all the qualities required of a leader. "No wonder everyone at camp loves you so much."

Percy smiled, "No more than they love you." Jason nodded at him, respect in his heart for the older hero.

"If you are the son of Poseidon," Echidna hissed, "you would not fear water. Jump, Percy Jackson. Show me that water will not harm you. Jump and retrieve your sword. Prove your bloodline."

"She believes it will kill him," Tisiphone said rolling her eyes, when some began to look at the book thoughtfully. Everyone looked away sheepishly.

Yeah, right, I thought. I'd read somewhere that jumping into water from a couple of stories up was like jumping onto solid asphalt. From here, I'd splatter on impact.

The Chimera's mouth glowed red, heating up for another blast.

"JUMP!" Perseus and Theseus yelled at him, causing Percy to practically jump out of his skin.

"Gods! The two of you nearly gave me a heart attack," he wheezed, the shock pumping adrenaline through his body.

"You have no faith," Echidna told me. "You do not trust the gods. I cannot blame you, little coward. Better you die now. The gods are faithless. The poison is in your heart."

"How dare she?" Zeus spoke in a low voice.

Hera scoffed, "She must've just been released from Tartarus after my Argus killed her. She's just
bitter.

She was right: I was dying. I could feel my breath slowing down. Nobody could save me, not even the gods.

I backed up and looked down at the water. I remembered the warm glow of my father's smile when I was a baby. He must have seen me. He must have visited me when I was in my cradle.

"If you remember that much, than he definitely did. Only the smile of a god, would be captured that intensely by the mind of a babe," Amphitrite said, her expression unreadable.

I remembered the swirling green trident that had appeared above my head the night of capture the flag, when Poseidon had claimed me as his son.

But this wasn't the sea. This was the Mississippi, dead center of the USA. There was no Sea God here.

"The sea is part of every body of water," Poseidon corrected gently, still unsure as of what to make of his future son.

"Die, faithless one," Echidna rasped, and the Chimera sent a column of flame toward my face.

"Father, help me," I prayed.

For a moment, Poseidon had thought his son would die, but when he heard that Percy had prayed to him...he didn't know how to feel. Relief, joy, worry and something else. An emotion that Poseidon wasn't sure how to identify.

I turned and jumped. My clothes on fire, poison coursing through my veins, I plummeted toward the river.

"He's safe," Perseus rejoiced.

"For now," Theseus said darkly.

Orion sighed. "You're going to be the death of these two Percy. And me too, it's scary hearing about your brushes with death." Percy shrugged, mystified by the elder heroes' behavior. Their anxiety for him was reaching new heights with every chapter, despite them knowing he came out of it just fine.

"Regardless," Alecto drawled, "the chapter is finished."

Aphrodite cleared her throat. But before she could speak there was a flash of golden light enveloping the future heroes. When the light vanished, a grumpy Thalia and an older Nico appeared. They both looked around wildly before realizing where they were. Thalia immediately reached up to play with her hair but not before Zoë caught a flash of silver in her dark hair.

Hera sensing there was about to be chaos, interrupted quickly, "I'm assuming that there has been a time switch for you both?" Thalia and Nico nodded, quelling some of the questions.

"Alright. I think it's about time we take another break. Come back in an hour and let's finish this book," Hera ordered after exchanging looks with Zeus. Both the King and Queen waited for the throne room to empty before taking their own exit.
And the Future Nico and Thalia are here! A lot more talk on the Tartarus situation from here on out. Percy can't hide stuff forever. Guess reading is not only helpful in changing views but will also therapeutic for him. Gods know he needs to talk about this stuff with someone who wasn't already there.

But I know nearly nothing about psychology. Bear with me as I amateurly diagnose what Percy is going through. And the cliffhanger? Totally intentional.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thalia had rushed Nico and Percy away from the throne room so they could finally talk. Jason followed behind them. The Greek trio exchanged a look, but in the end decided that Jason knew almost everything anyway. They just wouldn't mention the end of the war.

They stopped after a while, gulping in air. "Thals?" Percy broke the silence looking at her a little cautiously.

"Kelp Head!" She smacked him upside the head. He hissed in protest, rubbing his head. "That was for disappearing on us and making us worry out of our minds."

"Not my fault! That was because Hera kidnapped me and you know it!" He shot back and then turned to look at Nico, who was silent. "Hey are you okay? Haven't seen you since...well."

"We rescued you right? I mean this means we succeed and you don't suffocate to death," Jason said relieved.

Nico shot him an annoyed look. "Yeah great job." He turned to look at Percy, seeming to scan him. "Are you okay? After...everything? I've been there, it isn't exactly something you can forget and move on from that easily."

Percy nodded. "A bit of trouble, but I'll be fine. Best not to think about it. Where are you from?"

"Everything just ended." "Yeah for me too."

"Other than for Jason, none of us have had a chance to even breathe have we?"

"You?" Percy and Nico asked dubiously. She glared at them. "I was with the rest of the Hunt and the Amazons. I had a lot of work to do making sure you all could concentrate on the main battle without the other monsters getting in your way. And I helped protect Reyna. I was plenty busy."

"Speaking of the Hunt, you better hide that," Percy gestured to the circlet in her hair, symbolizing that she was the Lieutenant of the Hunt.

"You think I don't know that? A little warning would've been nice." Thalia said, pulling the circlet out of her hair and shoving it in her bag.

"What warning? I fell from the sky, remember?" Percy countered. However his argument had the undesired effect of making everyone laugh.

Nico stared at Percy for a beat. There was so much he wanted to say and at the same time nothing he wanted to say. He had just started to try moving on from the son of Poseidon. To interact and become friendly with other people. He was supposed to confess to Percy and then erase his feelings from existence. But here Percy wasn't...Nico could wait. There was really no harm. He had learned something from Cupid but at this particular moment he was more than willing to forget about that. Best part was that the Jason here didn't know his secret and couldn't push him to do anything about it.

"Percy...before, while we were reading, what was that? I mean your reaction seemed..." Jason
questioned, unable to articulate his thoughts.

Percy's eyes widened as he realized what Jason was talking about. "Nothing," Nico answered for him. "It was something that'll come up but for now it's best to not talk about it."

Thalia crossed her arms in disbelief. "And how exactly do you know what Percy went through?"

"Because he went through the same thing. But worse," Percy answered. Thalia stammered in shock, but before she could say anything else, a series of voices interrupted her.

"Percy!"

Percy and Nico turned around and moved away from each other, so that Thalia and Jason could see as well. It was Perseus and Theseus.

"What? Did Lady Hestia make another feast for us?" Jason asked incredulously remembering Theseus had interrupted them for that during the last break as well.

"Huh? Oh no. We were just coming so we could talk with Percy here. There's someone who wants to talk to you too Thalia."

Thalia looked surprised and Perseus pointed towards the left. Zoë Nightshade was stalking towards them. She looked as calm and poised as ever, but her eyes were screaming danger. Thalia was the only who she acknowledged as she came to a stop in front of the group.

"I have to ask Thalia, when you landed I had spotted a flash of silver in your hair." Percy and Nico exchanged a look. It was evident that Zoë had yet to learn subtlety. Must come from being related to a Titan and being extremely proud.

Thalia on the other hand, had an excellent poker face. "It must've been my silver earrings," Thalia pushed her hair away to reveal the large skull studs, "or it could be my bracelet." It too was pure silver. Thalia was a good liar, Hermes would be proud.

It was easy to tell that Zoë believed her too. After all, why would a girl lie to her right? It was obviously only boys that lied and cheated their way through life.

"Why are you two here? I mean, what did you both want talk to me about?"


"I have to ask, there isn't any reason beyond you wanting to save people right? Since most heroes don't just fall into life threatening situations every other minute."

"Where are you getting this from?" Percy asked appalled that the books were giving him such a reputation.

"Let's backtrack. We were having a conversation with Lord Hades and Lady Persephone..." Perseus began.

Theseus and Perseus listlessly left the throne room, the tension finally leaving their bodies. They had ended at such a terrible place and only the knowledge that Percy was safe and sound and much older than twelve kept them going. They were so lost in their minds that they didn't notice they had passed
Hades, Persephone, Demeter and the Furies.

"Are you boys alright?" Persephone asked slowly, not wanting to startle them.

"Yes, my Lady. We're fine. It just feels like we battled the monsters instead of reading about Percy doing it."

'You both have gotten attached to him very quickly," Hades observed.

"He is my brother." "He was named after me."

Hades shrugged, acquiescing to their claims. "He does get into a lot of trouble doesn't he? Even Hercules didn't get into that much trouble and Hera was literally pulling his strings, so she could make his life miserable. Though I don't know why she had to drag me into it," Hades grumbled near the end. Persephone put a hand on his shoulder.

"Perhaps he has a death wish?" Demeter suggested. "I'm sure you can cure him of it by feeding him some more bread!"

"A death wish!?! Both demigods exclaimed, their complexions paling. "That means more danger, which means we're gonna end getting heart attacks!" Perseus panicked.

"Why would he have a death wish? That sounds stupid," Alecto whispered to her sisters. "I mean he was actively trying to kill us."

"It could be for glory," Megaera rolled her eyes. Tisiphone disagreed. "Doesn't sound like his style. I think he's an actual hero. Wanting to help anyone and everyone. Those are the best to kill."

"That just means he's self-sacrificing," Alecto rolled her eyes. Hades cleared his throat and the three Furies looked up to see the two boys were sweating profusely and looked a little faint.

"Why don't you both go and talk to Percy?" Persephone suggested. "That way you can be cleared of these misconceptions the Furies and my mother have instilled, and figure out a way so he'll have to be more careful regarding his own safety."

"That's a great idea!" Theseus beamed. He said his goodbyes and pulled Perseus along with him so they could implement her suggestion right that minute.

"See why caring for other people you don't really know is not a good thing?" Hades asked his wife, who ignored him, watching the two boys run through Olympus.

"And that's what happened," Perseus concluded. "So what's the answer?"

Percy stared, his mouth open. "None of those reasons. I don't try to get in trouble. Trouble literally follows me! I have no other choice but to jump in!"

"He's not wrong. We can't take him anywhere," Nico supported Percy's claims.

"At least tell us things get easier to read," Theseus pleaded. "We can't take it any more." Percy's sheepish look told them that no such hopes would come to pass making them both groan in despair.

"Andromeda will hate you for giving me heart problems," Perseus informed Percy before heading back to the throne room. Theseus followed him morosely.

Percy sighed and Jason patted his shoulder. Percy tensed and looked as if he were about to judo flip
him, before he realized it was only Jason. "Let's just go back to the throne room."

Zoë ignored the boys, but followed them back to the throne room regardless.

Apollo came to a stop in front of Artemis, rolled his eyes and looked away. Artemis hurt, stared at Apollo before starting to back away herself. Hermes frowned shaking his head at Artemis. She ignored him, and her eyes never leaving Apollo continued to back away.

"Stop!" Hermes commanded, putting in just a tinge of godly command.

Artemis froze and Apollo threw Hermes a look of betrayal. His face contorted with disgust, Apollo tried to leave but Hermes blocked his path. "I meant you too! You can be as mad at me as you like, I don't care okay!"

"Why are you doing this Hermes?" Apollo asked in exasperation. Hermes ignored him.

"Artemis, are you sorry? Do you regret what you said?" He questioned her instead. She nodded immediately. "With all my heart. I am so sorry Apollo. I hadn't meant it like that and I have never felt more guilty. Please forgive me?"

Apollo hesitated before trying to walk away again. Hermes grabbed his arm. "Oh no you don't. You've said and done stupid stuff too and Arty has always forgiven you!"

Artemis made a face at being called Arty but didn't interrupt.

"Look. I might lose my son okay? And that idea has made me realize that I can't lose any of you. It would hurt me far too much. So stop fighting, you both love each other. Apollo keeping this up is hurting you the most. You're dying to talk with Artemis and we all know it! Give in already, let go of your pride!"

Apollo looked like a deer caught in headlights.

Artemis stepped closer to Apollo. "I really am sorry."

Apollo groaned before wrapping Artemis in a hug. "So am I."

"I should've never mentioned," "It was my fault doubting you," "How about we stop apologizing and go straight to forgiven?" Hermes cut in.

The twins nodded, genuine smiles appearing on their faces. "Good," Hermes said triumphantly before pouncing on the duo. "Group hug!" He declared.

The trio stayed that way for awhile, content to be with each other.

Zeus and Hera walked hand in hand. "You know what that voice in the pit meant right? Honestly? And don't deny it Zeus."

Zeus nodded reluctantly. "Some day in the future...Styx, I don't want this to happen. Will we never be free of him?"

She squeezed his hand, "I suppose this is why the Fates have the sent the books back to us. So we don't make the same mistakes and can prevent ourselves from facing such difficulties."

"You're right." Zeus smiled. "We can fix this before it even becomes a problem. Those demigods
aren't the most respectful though now are they?"

"If they've had to face what we suspect? I don't blame them for feeling differently."

Zeus merely hummed non-committedly. He continued walking forward, being pulled backwards. "Why'd you stop?" He turned back to his wife, who was trembling in fury. He turned to follow her gaze and spotted two lovers meeting. He frowned not understanding why it would upset Hera until the duo separated and Zeus saw it was none other than Ares and Aphrodite. Inwardly Zeus groaned. He and Hera had been having a good time but of course now it would be interrupted since there was no way Hera would ignore them.

And he was right. After a few moments, Hera began storming towards the god of war and the goddess of love. Zeus sighed before following her.

As he reached, Ares and Aphrodite oblivious that Hera or he were there, the Queen having steam billow out of her ears, Zeus could see that Aphrodite and Ares were good together. She controlled his bloodlust, he instigated her love. Perhaps that's why mortals were forever linking love and war. Hera would never accept it though and at the end, he didn't particularly care either. They would do what they wanted regardless.

Zeus sighed and cleared his throat. The sound, unbeknownst to the King, for the second time today caused the two lovers to separate.

Ares growled as he moved away from Aphrodite, but then smirked when he saw who it was. "Mum. Dad, so good to see you together," he mocked.

"Aphrodite, step away from him," Hera commanded. Aphrodite rose a delicate eyebrow, but started to comply when Ares wrapped his hand around her arm and pulled her closer to him.

"Ares!" Hera scolded, looking to Zeus for support. Zeus wearily nodded. "Listen to your Queen and mother Ares."

"Why? So she can lecture us again?"

"She's your brother's wife! Have some shame Ares," Hera looked utterly disappointed.

"Hephaestus has children with mortals and with other nymphs and minor goddesses as well. I don't think that there's any need for that," Aphrodite pointed out quietly but firmly. "We've all made our peace. Perhaps you should as well Hera."

"He's your husband! And you're the goddess of love. Shouldn't you try to love him and make your marriage work?"

"I am the goddess of love," Aphrodite agreed. "It's because of that I can't. The heart wants what it wants, and if I can't follow my own heart's desire, what right do I have to convince others to follow theirs? I value my domain above yours Hera, I always have and I always will. I think you need to focus on yourself a little more, before teaching me how to act according to my duties."

Ares nodded to Hera, flicking his eyes towards Zeus who remained silent. Then he and Aphrodite left hand in hand.

"Hera?" Zeus questioned her after their son and Aphrodite were gone.

"Let's just go read Zeus," she had nothing else left to say.
"So in water you have a tail?" Orion questioned curiously. He had never spoken to Triton so much before, nor had Triton ever even looked in Orion's general direction before. Triton nodded in response to Orion's question. "Better to swim with," he shrugged.

They were walking a little behind their father and Amphitrite, so they could avoid having to join in on their conversation.

"What about you? You're the only son of Poseidon who has ever been good at archery. Why do you spend all your time with Artemis?"

Orion flushed. "Oh well, that's because, I..." he stammered.

"You realize she is a maiden goddess yes? She'll never break her vows."

"I know that!" Orion insisted. "It's good enough to just be friends with her. But Apollo hates me," he sighed.

"You're with his little sister. Apollo is always going to hate you."

"No, I think it's just me. He'd be okay with some other hero. Like Perseus."

"The son of Zeus? Of course he would be okay with Perseus," Triton laughed. "Perseus' one and only true love is Andromeda. He doesn't even look at other girls. Apollo doesn't need to worry that Perseus will try to get Artemis to be with him." Orion drooped, trying to think of a comeback to that when Triton froze. Orion looked up to see that Amphitrite and his father looked rather unhappy. He turned to see Athena standing there.

"Why are you here Athena?" Poseidon asked perplexed.

"I-I," she took a deep breath. "I came to apologize."

"For?" Amphitrite asked coldly.

"Everything. Medusa, I overreacted. Athens was a competition, I shouldn't have bashed your contribution. And of course, I want to talk about Pallas."

"Don't say her name!" Triton snapped angrily.

"She was my best friend! I loved her. One minute we were having a mock fight and somehow my spear hurt her. I still don't understand how, she was a talented fighter. She should've dodged! I've told you this before!"

"I don't believe you. Not then and not now," Triton interrupted. "Pallas was a gifted warrior yes. And unless you planned on killing her there is no way a practice fight could kill her. On top of that your childish fights with my father prove that you want to make an enemy of us. You know Athena? I once loved you as a daughter. But you betrayed me."

"I didn't!" Athena cried. "I love you as my father. What happened with Pallas was a tragic accident, nothing more. I created the palladium in honor of her!"

"Ah yes, the palladium. Which has allowed you to take even her name as your own!" Triton shook his head. "Don't lie to me at least Athena."

He walked away with Amphitrite and Orion following behind them hurriedly. Poseidon looked at Athena curiously, but went after his son, knowing the pain he still felt. Athena watching them leave,
shut her eyes in frustration.

Then she felt determined. At the end of these books, one way or another, Athena would prove her innocence to Triton. She vowed it.

Hestia sat down next to Hephaestus. "You alright?"

He stopped tinkering with his metals to look at her. "Aunt Hestia! Yes, no I'm fine."

"You sure?" She asked kindly. He nodded as he wiped his fingers on a grease-filled cloth.

"You're not the only one who's alone here you know?" Hestia pointed to Hercules who was watching the daily life of the Olympus dwellers. The satyrs, the nymphs, the minor gods and goddesses interacting with each other.

"Life is messy. Dealing with other people is messy. That's why automatons are so much better."

"Give people a chance. And I mean other than our family. They're going to need a long time before they can begin to even tolerate each other's company."

"But the books are a start?"

Hestia smiled and nodded. "The books are definitely a good start."

"And those two?" They saw Dionysus and Ariadne sitting by a tree, looking completely in love. "Sometimes I still can't believe it just isn't Aphrodite or Eros' magic at play. Dionysus who is always irritated at something, being so happy without alcohol with someone else." Hephaestus shook his head.

"That's the power of love. One day, I hope you all will be able to look at each other that way." At Hephaestus' horrified look, Hestia rolled her eyes. "Eventually. In the future. It'll be a good thing, stop looking like I murdered your newborn child!"

Hephaestus looked away. "May that day come never." Hestia sighed in defeat, her family seemed to hate even the idea of getting along.

"Let's go back. Everyone else is seems ready to go as well," Hestia pointed out seeing Hercules get up and Dionysus and Ariadne heading in the direction of the throne room. "Hephaestus nodded.

Everyone sat back down in their respective seats ready to continue with the book.

"Where were we?" Hermes asked.

"I was falling to my potential death," Percy answered brightly.


"Well who wants to read now?" Ariadne questioned, leaning on her husband's shoulder.

"Ares will. Won't you Ares?" Hera commanded rather than asked.

Ares sighed but stopped playing with Aphrodite's hair and stuck out his hand for the book. Zeus sent it flying towards him and Ares caught it without looking.
"Here we go." He drawled...**I Become A Known Fugitive**

Chapter End Notes

Alright we have some relationships getting better; others worse. They're kinda getting there. Hestia's hope will (hopefully [yes pun intended]) not be in vain!
I'd love to tell you I had some deep revelation on my way down, that I came to terms with my own mortality, laughed in the face of death, et cetera.

They all sent furious looks towards Percy. He shook his head in disbelief. No matter how many times this happened, it would always be strange for him. Normally the gods and every other member of his family he ever met, had wanted to kill him. This was breaking the pattern Percy had established.

He also privately thought that it was impossible to laugh in the face of Death for him, Thanatos was way too quiet and serious. Laughing would have just made him feel awkward.

The truth? My only thought was: Aaaaggghhhhh!

A snicker here and there. Thalia and Nico on the other hand were crushing Percy's hands. Percy grimaced, holding in a yelp of pain.

Apollo looked at Percy puzzled as to why he was praying to him at that moment. Seeing Percy's hands turn purple made Apollo try to swallow his grin. It wouldn't be right, seeing how worried most of the room was for Percy.

The river raced toward me at the speed of a truck. Wind ripped the breath from my lungs. Steeples and skyscrapers and bridges tumbled in and out of my vision.

And then: Flaaa-boooom!

Perseus and Theseus winced. Would their worry for Percy ever come to an end? It certainly felt like worrying was all they had been doing since opening the bloody book.

"Even for a son of Poseidon, that's got to hurt." Triton observed.

"You know? I'm pretty sure it did. The water helped heal me though, so the pain didn't last very long," Percy said as he thought back. "Also I think the Chimera poison pain was more overwhelming. I might've not even noticed when I crashed into the river."

A whiteout of bubbles. I sank through the murk, sure that I was about to end up embedded in a hundred feet of mud and lost forever.

But my impact with the water hadn't hurt. I was falling slowly now, bubbles trickling up through my fingers. I settled on the river bottom soundlessly. A catfish the size of my stepfather lurched away into the gloom.

"I'd rather the catfish than that...there isn't a word appropriate enough to describe that horrible excuse of a human being," Thalia said in disgust.

"Actually, he's very human," Percy corrected.

Zoë rolled her eyes. "There is a word Thalia. It's called men."
"The Hunters aren't like Circe are they?" Nico asked quietly. The others shrugged.

Clouds of silt and disgusting garbage—beer bottles, old shoes, plastic bags—swirled all around me.

Artemis, Zoë, Demeter and those related to the sea all gagged.

Hermes drooped. "Without Pan..."

"We'll just have to ensure this never happens." Amphitrite told him. "We won't let Pan disappear or his domain to be put in peril." Hermes nodded determined, his earlier resolution coming back to him.

At that point, I realized a few things: first, I had not been flattened into a pancake. I had not been barbecued. I couldn't even feel the Chimera poison boiling in my veins anymore. I was alive, which was good.

"The water is really helpful," Orion sighed. As good as nectar or ambrosia when it came to healing them. "Though I wish you wouldn't have to feel its effects." Percy winced, that would never stop happening. He had been terrified of water for awhile, but he'd never stop needing its healing properties.

Second realization: I wasn't wet. I mean, I could feel the coolness of the water. I could see where the fire on my clothes had been quenched. But when I touched my own shirt, it felt perfectly dry.

I looked at the garbage floating by and snatched an old cigarette lighter.

"Learning new tricks. It's always so much fun," Thalia smirked now that Percy wasn't dying or in danger.

"My favourite part," Jason agreed.

No way, I thought.

I flicked the lighter. It sparked. A tiny flame appeared, right there at the bottom of the Mississippi.

"I should show Leo," Percy mused. "I wonder if we can combine our powers underwater." At Thalia, Jason and Nico's looks, Percy shrugged. "What? I can make air bubbles so he can still breathe. How cool would it be if we could do attacks that way?" They all agreed with him. No one would know they were coming.

I grabbed a soggy hamburger wrapper out of the current and immediately the paper turned dry. I lit it with no problem. As soon as I let it go, the flames sputtered out. The wrapper turned back into a slimy rag. Weird.

"Not weird. You're the one giving the lighter and the wrapper its normal properties," Amphitrite explained.

But the strangest thought occurred to me only last: I was breathing. I was underwater, and I was breathing normally.

"Of course that's the thought which would come last," Zoë shook her head. She should've known the most important and obvious of facts would be overlooked by a boy.
"I'd consider that last too. My first thought would be that I'm still alive," Thalia shrugged. Several others agreed with her.

I stood up, thigh-deep in mud. My legs felt shaky. My hands trembled. I should've been dead. The fact that I wasn't seemed like ... well, a miracle. I imagined a woman's voice, a voice that sounded a bit like my mother: Percy, what do you say?

"Aunt Sally?" Nico asked incredulously.

"Uh no, it wasn't Mom. Just sounded like her at the moment. Looks like her too."

"Who was it?"

"A Nereid?" Triton questioned. Percy nodded.

"Um...thanks." Underwater, I sounded like I did on recordings, like a much older kid. "Thank you...Father."

"You're welcome. Though you don't need to thank me for it," Poseidon replied. Percy gave his father a look, exhausted by the conversation already.

No response. Just the dark drift of garbage downriver, the enormous catfish gliding by, the flash of sunset on the water's surface far above, turning everything the color of butterscotch.

"Is that good or bad?" Ariadne asked cautiously.

"Well butterscotch is good, and a kind of golden colour so I'm assuming good," Jason shrugged.

"It's the sun. What do you expect?" Apollo bragged.

Why had Poseidon saved me?

"Because you're my son," Poseidon said simply. That made Percy smile, genuinely for once.

The more I thought about it, the more ashamed I felt. So I'd gotten lucky a few times before. Against a thing like the Chimera, I had never stood a chance. Those poor people in the Arch were probably toast. I couldn't protect them. I was no hero. Maybe I should just stay down here with the catfish, join the bottom feeders.

"It doesn't care about mortals," Athena informed him. "No need to feel guilty."

Percy's eyes widened as if he didn't believe what was happening. A glance at Nico and Thalia told him that they were just as stunned.

Artemis and Zoë also exchanged looks. It was becoming clearer that Percy Jackson was no ordinary hero.

Fump-fump-fump. A riverboat's paddlewheel churned above me, swirling the silt around.

There, not five feet in front of me, was my sword, its gleaming bronze hilt sticking up in the mud.

"Anaklusmos. Riptide. Fitting you find it in at the bottom of the lake," Hestia mused.

The statement made Zoë flinch, knowing that her immortal power lived on in the sword, which had
once come from the sea. If only she hadn't been so foolish. Zoë stopped her train of thought, unwilling to indulge in what-ifs.

I heard that woman's voice again: Percy, take the sword. Your father believes in you. This time, I knew the voice wasn't in my head. I wasn't imagining it. Her words seemed to come from everywhere, rippling through the water like dolphin sonar.

"Where are you?" I called aloud.

Then, through the gloom, I saw her—a woman the color of the water, a ghost in the current, floating just above the sword. She had long billowing hair, and her eyes, barely visible, were green like mine.

"It's a trait of the sea," Amphitrite said quietly. The others looked around to see that in fact, she, Triton, Poseidon and all of his demigod children all had sea green eyes.

A lump formed in my throat. I said, "Mom?"

The past demigods, Nico, as well as Ariadne all winced. They knew the pain of losing a beloved parent. Having a vision of them is nothing but pain. Persephone glanced at her own mother, despite Demeter annoying her at times, Persephone didn't know what she would do if she ever lost her mother.

No, child, only a messenger, though your mother's fate is not as hopeless as you believe. Go to the beach in Santa Monica.

Hades and his Furies straightened. The way he took the boy's mother was unnatural. Maybe that gave him the leeway to give her back? But why take her to begin with was the real question.

"What?"

It is your father's will. Before you descend into the Underworld, you must go to Santa Monica. Please, Percy, I cannot stay long. The river here is too foul for my presence.

Triton winced in disgust. How had the water become so dirty? How could he have let that happen?

"But..." I was sure this woman was my mother, or a vision of her, anyway.

"I just realized but you compared your mother to a Nereid," Hera said.

"Um yeah?" Percy was confused.

"You are a wonderful son!" She beamed at him. Percy was still confused but he accepted Hera's praise silently.

"Who—how did you—"

There was so much I wanted to ask, the words jammed up in my throat.

I cannot stay, brave one, the woman said. She reached out, and I felt the current brush my face like a caress. You must go to Santa Monica! And, Percy, do not trust the gifts...

"Gifts?" Hercules repeated. "Makes sense. Everything comes for a price." His voice was exceptionally bitter. Others looked at him. Most still didn't like him, though they had to admit that
most of his problems weren't actually his fault. He had really rotten luck.

Artemis and Zoë maintained that there was no need for him to drag others in on it, but the demigods themselves did understand his problems. Didn't agree with his methods but they did understand why.

*Her voice faded.*

"Gifts?" I asked. "What gifts? Wait!"

She made one more attempt to speak, but the sound was gone. Her image melted away. If it was my mother, I had lost her again.

"It must've have been the trash. It made the water too dirty which made it too hard for her to stay," Triton theorized.

Percy tried to forget how he felt at that moment. He couldn't imagine having to go through that ever again.

*I felt like drowning myself. The only problem: I was immune to drowning.*

Aphrodite blinked at him sadly. "I love all kinds of love. Romantic love the most. But familial love that strong? It's so rare and so beautiful. May you and your mother never lose that bond."

Percy smiled at her gratefully. "Thank you, Lady Aphrodite."

*Your father believes in you, she had said.*

She'd also called me brave...unless she was talking to the catfish.

Slowly, laughter ensued in the throne room. Only Percy would consider the catfish to be braver than him.

*I waded toward Riptide and grabbed it by the hilt. The Chimera might still be up there with its snaky, fat mother, waiting to finish me off. At the very least, the mortal police would be arriving, trying to figure out who had blown a hole in the Arch. If they found me, they'd have some questions.*

"Mortal police," the future demigods all groaned. Nico shook his head. "And don't get me started on Social Services."

"They're the worst. I keep having to manipulate the Mist whenever they see u-me," Thalia added.

"How do they know you're not just camping or something? I've never had problems with that on a quest." Percy asked nonplussed.

"Well on a quest you're always moving. Never sticking around in one place. Whereas in general, you'd stick to one city or something. I remember Leo said it was really hard trying to run away." Jason contributed to the discussion.

"What are Social Services?" Hestia questioned.

"A group which takes kids who don't have a place to live and gives them a home."

"That sounds wonderful," Hera said, pleased mortals would take care of each other like that.
"Not necessarily," they all disagreed.

I capped my sword, stuck the ballpoint pen in my pocket. "Thank you, Father," I said again to the dark water.

"You are welcome, Son," Apollo said in a deep voice. Poseidon flicked water on him, making everyone go from snickering to full out laughter.

Then I kicked up through the muck and swam for the surface.

Amphitrite swallowed in disgust. "How did things get so awful? We're always taking good care of the water. And the river gods should be cleaning themselves as well."

"There's so much trash there, that it's impossible to clean. And it just ends up making the river gods sick," Percy explained once again remembering how East and Hudson had looked. And how desperate they were for the sand dollar. It made him think that it might be a good idea to talk to his father once he was in his own time again, so they could work on cleaning the poor rivers.

His dad should agree to it, the rivers' water ended up going to the sea. The stronger the rivers were, the stronger the sea. And Poseidon was the sea.

I came ashore next to a floating McDonald's.

A block away, every emergency vehicle in St. Louis was surrounding the Arch. Police helicopters circled overhead. The crowd of onlookers reminded me of Times Square on New Year's Eve.

"That's bad?" Ariadne questioned.

"Large crowds. The Arch kinda blew up. Very bad," Percy agreed.

A little girl said, "Mama! That boy walked out of the river."

"That's nice, dear," her mother said, craning her neck to watch the ambulances.

"But he's dry!"

"That's nice, dear."

"What sort of a mother is she!?!" Demeter ranted. "Who ignores what their child is saying like that?"

"Well it may have been bad on the mother's part, but it was lucky for me," Percy pointed out.

"If mortals saw him come out of the river dry, well...it wouldn't be good," Thalia put in. Demeter still looked rather upset.

A news lady was talking for the camera: "Probably not a terrorist attack, we're told, but it's still very early in the investigation. The damage, as you can see, is very serious. We're trying to get to some of the survivors, to question them about eyewitness reports of someone falling from the Arch."

Survivors. I felt a surge of relief. Maybe the park ranger and that family made it out safely. I hoped Annabeth and Grover were okay.
I tried to push through the crowd to see what was going on inside the police line.

"Why?" Hermes questioned stunned. "You should be running out of there fast as possible."

"With your friends I mean," he added after a couple of seconds, when he realized Grover was with him and the others in the room were staring at him.

"...an adolescent boy," another reporter was saying. "Channel Five has learned that surveillance cameras show an adolescent boy going wild on the observation deck, somehow setting off this freak explosion.

"They're blaming you?" Ariadne asked aghast.

"As far as they can tell I'm the only one who could've done it. Echidna and her Chimera must've disappeared as soon as I started to fall into the Mississippi. There was nobody else they could blame."

"I know the feeling," Hades muttered.

Hard to believe, John, but that's what we're hearing. Again, no confirmed fatalities ..."

I backed away, trying to keep my head down. I had to go a long way around the police perimeter. Uniformed officers and news reporters were everywhere.

I'd almost lost hope of ever finding Annabeth and Grover when a familiar voice bleated, "Perrr-ey!"

"Good old Goat Boy! He probably sniffed you out."

"Are you saying I smell Thalia?"

"Yup. Like dead fish," she smirked.

I turned and got tackled by Grover's bear hug—or goat hug. "

"Cute," Dionysus snarked. Ariadne rubbed his arm gently, making him relax.

He said, "We thought you'd gone to Hades the hard way!"

"No, that would be the easy way," Megaera clarified.

"But hard as in no chance of ever leaving," Tisiphone cackled.

Annabeth stood behind him, trying to look angry, but even she seemed relieved to see me. "We can't leave you alone for five minutes! What happened?"

"I sort of fell."

"Percy! Six hundred and thirty feet?"

"She worries for him!" Aphrodite cooed excitedly.

"We're all worrying for him," Hermes pointed out. The goddess of love and beauty glared at him for trying to ruin her matchmaking.
Behind us, a cop shouted, "Gangway!" The crowd parted, and a couple of paramedics hustled out, rolling a woman on a stretcher. I recognized her immediately as the mother of the little boy who'd been on the observation deck. She was saying, "And then this huge dog, this huge fire-breathing Chihuahua—"

"Chimera," some of the gods corrected absently. Hera rolled her eyes, just like them all to be caught up in technicalities.

"Okay, ma'am," the paramedic said. "Just calm down. Your family is fine. The medication is starting to kick in."

"Medication makes it harder to see through the Mist?" Zoë guessed. Thalia nodded. "Which is bad for monsters, since clear-sighted mortals have a habit of warning demigods of nearby danger. It ends with the monsters losing their lives."

"Clear-sighted mortals are great," Percy defended thinking of both his mother and Rachel.

"We're not disagreeing with you," Thalia said dryly.

"I'm not crazy! This boy jumped out of the hole and the monster disappeared." Then she saw me. "There he is! That's the boy!"

"Non-clear sighted mortals not so great," Jason sighed.

"The Mist also helps people forget we exist. Chiron should've taught you how to manipulate it before sending you on the quest. It would've made things much easier," Thalia frowned.

"Nah, manipulating the Mist is more your thing. Or Hazel's."

I turned quickly and pulled Annabeth and Grover after me. We disappeared into the crowd.

"What's going on?" Annabeth demanded. "Was she talking about the Chihuahua on the elevator?"

I told them the whole story of the Chimera, Echidna, my high-dive act, and the underwater lady's message.

"I'm sure they didn't go out of their minds with worry," Orion said dryly.

"You all shouldn't have either. This was years in the past!" Percy defended.

"Whoa," said Grover. "We've got to get you to Santa Monica! You can't ignore a summons from your dad."

"Well you could, but he'd show up and make you do it anyway," Thalia corrected. That's exactly what Hermes had done with Luke when they were all on the run. Or her father, when she got Aegis.

Before Annabeth could respond, we passed another reporter doing a news break, and I almost froze in my tracks when he said, "Percy Jackson. That's right, Dan. Channel Twelve has learned that the boy who may have caused this explosion fits the description of a young man wanted by authorities for a serious New Jersey bus accident three days ago. And the boy is believed to be traveling west. For our viewers at home, here is a photo of Percy Jackson."
They all groaned at that. Percy seriously had rotten luck. Now not only did he have the supernatural behind him but also mortal forces preventing him from achieving success.

Zeus was beginning to worry even more for the fate of his beloved Master Bolt. If anything happened to it...Zeus didn't know what he would end up doing. Whoever really took it, future or past, was going to pay.

We ducked around the news van and slipped into an alley.

"First things first," I told Grover. "We've got to get out of town!"

Somehow, we made it back to the Amtrak station without getting spotted. We got on board the train just before it pulled out for Denver. The train trundled west as darkness fell, police lights still pulsing against the St. Louis skyline behind us.

"And that's the end of the chapter," Ares said bored out of his mind. He had thought there would at least be more action but alas.

"I'll read next," Dionysus said yawning. Ares tossed the book and a bright green vine caught it, delivering the book into Dionysus' waiting hands....A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers

Chapter End Notes

Environmentalism! Very important for them. They're all for saving Mother Earth. (Not Gaea obviously).
The next afternoon, June 14, seven days before the solstice, our train rolled into Denver. We hadn't eaten since the night before in the dining car, somewhere in Kansas. We hadn't taken a shower since Half-Blood Hill, and I was sure that was obvious.

"A shower?"

"Cleaned themselves."

"Oh gross." Aphrodite wrinkled her nose.

"A reality of quests," Hercules said quietly.

"Let's try to contact Chiron," Annabeth said. "I want to tell him about your talk with the river spirit."

"We can't use phones, right?"

"I'm not talking about phones."

"Phones are forbidden?" Athena asked curiously.

"They're devices which can contact each other with different combinations of numbers. But demigods can't use as they emit a signal to monsters."

We wandered through downtown for about half an hour, though I wasn't sure what Annabeth was looking for. The air was dry and hot, which felt weird after the humidity of St. Louis. Everywhere we turned, the Rocky Mountains seemed to be staring at me, like a tidal wave about to crash into the city.

"Of course you'd compare it to a wave." Orion smirked.

"You do that too?"

"We all do," Triton confirmed.

Finally we found an empty do-it-yourself car wash. We veered toward the stall farthest from the street, keeping our eyes open for patrol cars. We were three adolescents hanging out at a car wash without a car; any cop worth his doughnuts would figure we were up to no good.

"That is so stereotypical Percy," Nico rose a brow.

"Give me a break. I was twelve. And be real, who doesn't think of cops as people constantly eating donuts?"

Nico was silent for a couple minutes. "I blame cartoons."

"We all do Neeks. We all do."
"What exactly are we doing?" I asked, as Grover took out the spray gun.

"It's seventy-five cents," he grumbled. "I've only got two quarters left. Annabeth?"

"Don't look at me," she said. "The dining car wiped me out."

I fished out my last bit of change and passed Grover a quarter, which left me two nickels and one drachma from Medusa's place.

"Excellent," Grover said. "We could do it with a spray bottle, of course, but the connection isn't as good, and my arm gets tired of pumping."

"What exactly are you doing?" Persephone asked perplexed by the need for mortal money and a spray bottle, whatever that was. Percy merely gestured towards the book.

"What are you talking about?"

He fed in the quarters and set the knob to FINE MIST. "I-M'ing."

"Instant messaging?"

"Iris-messaging," Annabeth corrected.

"But that's only for the gods," Poseidon said confused.

"I guess Lady Iris expanded to demigods since there aren't that many of us. She's probably less busy in the future," Thalia shrugged.

"Actually it's made her very busy. She's trained Fleecy, a cloud nymph, to do them instead. Gives her time to bake...uh interesting Ding Dongs. Fleecy is nice though," Percy corrected.

"How do you know?" Hermes asked.

"Oh, because Fleecy made a message to let people know how to contact her instead. Directly, so she doesn't have to keep checking Lady Iris' line," Percy lied with a straight face.

Hermes nodded. "That makes sense. Hard enough on your own line, without having to work two people's lines. Smart of her." Percy inwardly sighed in relief.

"The rainbow goddess Iris carries messages for the gods. If you know how to ask, and she's not too busy, she'll do the same for half-bloods."

"You summon the goddess with a spray gun?"

Grover pointed the nozzle in the air and water hissed out in a thick white mist. "Unless you know an easier way to make a rainbow."

"So you can't do Iris messages without a rainbow right?" Jason confirmed quietly. The other future demigods nodded.

"You know rainbows are manly? Butch scares me more than anyone I know," Jason said incredulously.

"Yes," Percy and Nico said simultaneously. "Iris gave me a lovely tie day bag. It was very
masculine," Percy added. The others said nothing.

Sure enough, late afternoon light filtered through the vapor and broke into colors.

Annabeth held her palm out to me. "Drachma, please."

I handed it over.

"What if you only have denarii?"

"Then you can't do an Iris message."

She raised the coin over her head. "O goddess, accept our offering."

She threw the drachma into the rainbow. It disappeared in a golden shimmer.


"I thought you had to say the name of the person you wanted to talk to?" Jason asked.

"Doesn't always matter. Sometimes you only get connected to the place and have to make do either way," Percy shrugged.

"Reliable," Jason rolled his eyes.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then I was looking through the mist at strawberry fields, and the Long Island Sound in the distance. We seemed to be on the porch of the Big House. Standing with his back to us at the railing was a sandy-haired guy in shorts and an orange tank top. He was holding a bronze sword and seemed to be staring intently at something down in the meadow.

Thalia growled, instinctively knowing exactly who it was.

"Luke!" I called.

Now Nico growled. Percy only rolled his eyes.

He turned, eyes wide. I could swear he was standing three feet in front of me through a screen of mist, except I could only see the part of him that appeared in the rainbow.

"Percy!" His scarred face broke into a grin. "Is that Annabeth, too? Thank the gods! Are you guys okay?"

"Bet you didn't expect that did you? Probably wanted them dead by now," Thalia muttered angrily. "Thalia!" Percy hissed. "Quiet down, the Fates said to not reveal anything remember?" She went silent but her eyes expressed only anger.

"We're ... uh ... fine," Annabeth stammered. She was madly straightening her dirty T-shirt, trying to comb the loose hair out of her face. "We thought—Chiron—I mean—"

"Annabeth had a pretty big crush on him huh?" Aphrodite asked slyly. "Sounds cute."

Percy only shrugged, making her pout in disappointment.
"He's down at the cabins." Luke's smile faded. "We're having some issues with the campers. Listen, is everything cool with you? Is Grover all right?"

Before Nico could even begin, Percy grasped his shoulder. Nico froze, slowly turning to look at him.

"Please. I know you hate him, but don't say anything." Percy pleaded and Nico grit his teeth but nodded.

"I'm right here," Grover called. He held the nozzle out to one side and stepped into Luke's line of vision. "What kind of issues?"

Just then a big Lincoln Continental pulled into the car wash with its stereo turned to maximum hip-hop. As the car slid into the next stall, the bass from the subwoofers vibrated so much, it shook the pavement.

"People can be so inconsiderate," Demeter sniffed.

"Those are the best types to kill or pass judgement upon," Alecto sighed blissfully.

"Chiron had to—what's that noise?" Luke yelled.

"I'll take care of it." Annabeth yelled back, looking very relieved to have an excuse to get out of sight.

"Oh, she definitely has a crush!" Aphrodite giggled.

Athena and Hermes looked at each other and simultaneously shuddered.

Jason leaned over. "Wait till she finds out her son has a crush on Apollo's daughter." (1)

"She might not. Doubt Kelp Head found any interest in mentioning that," Thalia said skeptically. Percy shrugged at her.

"Grover, come on!

"What?" Grover said. "But—"

"Give Percy the nozzle and come on!" she ordered.

"Poor Grover," Thalia snickered, ignoring the reason as to why Annabeth was ordering him to go. Grover muttered something about girls being harder to understand than the Oracle at Delphi, A pause, and, after quite some time, the throne room exploded in laughter.

"For satyrs, maybe," Artemis rolled her eyes, but even she was amused.

"Rachel isn't though," Jason whispered.

"That's right Golden Boy. Her prophecies are though," Percy grinned back, not noticing Nico and Thalia's surprised looks.

then he handed me the spray gun and followed Annabeth.

I readjusted the hose so I could keep the rainbow going and still see Luke.
"Chiron had to break up a fight," Luke shouted to me over the music. "Things are pretty tense here, Percy. Word leaked out about the Zeus—Poseidon standoff. We're still not sure how—probably the same scumbag who summoned the hellhound.

"Funny he uses the word scumbag. Quite an apt description," Thalia growled.


"Guys. Please. I'm no fan, but please," Percy begged. The two nodded reluctantly.

Now the campers are starting to take sides. It's shaping up like the Trojan War all over again. Aphrodite, Ares, and Apollo are backing Poseidon, more or less. Athena is backing Zeus."

"Trojan War?"

"Spoilers!" All four future demigods chorused, "Of the highest extent," Jason muttered to the other three.

I shuddered to think that Clarisse's cabin would ever be on my dad's side for anything.

Ares rolled his eyes. Typical of demigods to hold grudges over having allies in a war.

In the next stall, I heard Annabeth and some guy arguing with each other, then the music's volume decreased drastically.

"Go Annabeth!" Apollo cheered.

"He looks happy," Demeter hissed towards Hermes. He smiled secretively. "Good things happened during the break." Demeter left it at that.

"So what's your status?" Luke asked me. "Chiron will be sorry he missed you."

I told him pretty much everything, including my dreams. It felt so good to see him, to feel like I was back at camp even for a few minutes, that I didn't realize how long I had talked until the beeper went off on the spray machine, and I realized I only had one more minute before the water shut off.

"You two must be really good friends!" Hermes said cheerfully.

"He was my best friend after Grover," Percy said a little wistfully. Thalia patted his shoulder. Luke had a way of getting under a person's skin. You felt like you could trust him with anything. That's why his betrayal hit so hard.

"I wish I could be there," Luke told me. "We can't help much from here, I'm afraid, but listen...it had to be Hades who took the master bolt. He was there at Olympus at the winter solstice. I was chaperoning a field trip and we saw him."

"I'm always there at the winter solstice. How dare this demigod-"

"Hades please. We know you didn't. They don't. Please?" Persephone asked. Hades scowled but he listened to his wife.

"But Chiron said the gods can't take each other's magic items directly."
"That's true," Luke said, looking troubled. "Still...Hades has the helm of darkness. How could anybody else sneak into the throne room and steal the master bolt? You'd have to be invisible."

"Did he just accuse my daughter of having stolen the bolt?" Athena asked dangerously.

"Oh, not again," Dionysus said when he saw Zeus about to yell. "Let me keep reading," and without waiting for a response, Dionysus continued.

We were both silent, until Luke seemed to realize what he'd said.

"Oh, hey," he protested. "I didn't mean Annabeth. She and I have known each other forever. She would never...I mean, she's like a little sister to me."


I wondered if Annabeth would like that description.

"She won't," Aphrodite confirmed sadly.

In the stall next to us, the music stopped completely. A man screamed in terror, car doors slammed, and the Lincoln peeled out of the car wash.

They all stopped and stared at the book. "What did she do to them?" Tisiphone asked gleefully.

"I never found out," Percy shrugged.

"You'd better go see what that was," Luke said. "Listen, are you wearing the flying shoes? I'll feel better if I know they've done you some good."

"Oh...uh, yeah!" I tried not to sound like a guilty liar. "Yeah, they've come in handy."

"Really?" He grinned. "They fit and everything?"

"He believed you? Wow, you must be a really good liar," Hermes complimented in awe. Percy shrugged.

The water shut off. The mist started to evaporate.

"Well, take care of yourself out there in Denver," Luke called, his voice getting fainter. "And tell Grover it'll be better this time! Nobody will get turned into a pine tree if he just—"


"He did," Nico confirmed warily.

Thalia exploded. "How could he! He knows it wasn't Grover's fault! I can't believe he'd stoop so—" Percy jabbed his elbow in her ribs, causing her to double over and stare at him hatefully. "I know you're mad, but for now keep quiet!"

Thalia snarled, muttering curses beneath her breath but obliged nonetheless.

But the mist was gone, and Luke's image faded to nothing. I was alone in a wet, empty car
wash and Grover came around the corner, laughing, but stopped when they saw my face. Annabeth's smile faded. "What happened, Percy? What did Luke say?"

"Not much," I lied, my stomach feeling as empty as a Big Three cabin.

Poseidon and Zeus winced again, wondering how bad it must've gotten to need an oath preventing them from having demigod children.

"Come on, let's find some dinner."

A few minutes later, we were sitting at a booth in a gleaming chrome diner. All around us, families were eating burgers and drinking malts and sodas.

Finally the waitress came over. She raised her eyebrow skeptically. "Well?"

I said, "We, um, want to order dinner."

"You kids have money to pay for it?"

"Curse you cruel world, where a couple of kids on a quest can't get any food," Apollo said mournfully in as dramatic a manner as possible.

"What did you do to him?" Demeter asked suspiciously.

"Nothing! He's just really happy!" Hermes defended.

Grover's lower lip quivered. I was afraid he would start bleating, or worse, start eating the linoleum. Annabeth looked ready to pass out from hunger.

I was trying to think up a sob story for the waitress

"You poor kids. Food should never be denied from you!" Demeter said. "Would you like some bread?"

They all denied her as politely as they could.

when a rumble shook the whole building; a motorcycle the size of a baby elephant had pulled up to the curb.

All conversation in the diner stopped. The motorcycle's headlight glared red. Its gas tank had flames painted on it, and a shotgun holster riveted to either side, complete with shotguns. The seat was leather—but leather that looked like ... well, Caucasian human skin.

The guy on the bike would've made pro wrestlers run for Mama. He was dressed in a red muscle shirt and black jeans and a black leather duster, with a hunting knife strapped to his thigh. He wore red wraparound shades, and he had the cruelest, most brutal face I'd ever seen — handsome, I guess, but wicked—with an oily black crew cut and cheeks that were scarred from many, many fights. The weird thing was, I felt like I'd seen his face somewhere before.

The gods all stopped in surprise, turning towards Ares.

"Huh. It's me," he announced. "Not a bad description punk."

"This where you make an enemy of him?" Thalia asked, her voice as low as possible.
Percy shook his head, his voice as equally low. "Next chapter or so probably." Thalia groaned.

As he walked into the diner, a hot, dry wind blew through the place. All the people rose, as if they were hypnotized, but the biker waved his hand dismissively and they all sat down again. Everybody went back to their conversations.

"Now that's a grand entrance," Aphrodite complimented. Ares grinned at her.

The waitress blinked, as if somebody had just pressed the rewind button on her brain. She asked us again, "You kids have money to pay for it?"

The biker said, "It's on me." He slid into our booth, which was way too small for him, and crowded Annabeth against the window.

Athena glared at him and Ares rolled his eyes dismissively. "Oh, it doesn't matter Theeny.'

Athena's eye twitched but she willed herself to remain silent.

He looked up at the waitress, who was gaping at him, and said, "Are you still here?"

He pointed at her, and she stiffened. She turned as if she'd been spun around, then marched back toward the kitchen.

The biker looked at me. I couldn't see his eyes behind the red shades, but bad feelings started boiling in my stomach. Anger, resentment, bitterness. I wanted to hit a wall. I wanted to pick a fight with somebody. Who did this guy think he was?

"Ares, god of war," Ares answered, raising a brow in amusement.

He gave me a wicked grin. "So you're old Seaweed's kid, huh?"

"Old Seaweed?" Poseidon repeated.

"Don't sweat it, Uncle Poseidon. I mean no harm. Just a statement." Poseidon just hummed and leaned back into his throne.

I should've been surprised, or scared, but instead I felt like I was looking at my stepdad, Gabe.

"Hey!" Ares lost his smirk. "Don't compare me to that fat idiot!"

"You're right. I'm sorry," Percy agreed making his friends stare at him.

"You're not Percy," Thalia said. "Who are you?"

"Oh shut up Thalia." Thalia marveled at him, still unable to believe Percy apologized to Ares. "I blame Frank. And the fact that Mars' prophecies are my favourite."

"Makes sense," his three friends agreed.

I wanted to rip this guy's head off. "What's it to you?"

Annabeth's eyes flashed me a warning. "Percy, this is—"

The biker raised his hand.
"S'okay," he said. "I don't mind a little attitude.

"That's awfully kind of you," Hera said suspiciously, her eyes narrowed. "You want something."

Ares shrugged. "Perhaps so, mother dearest."

**Long as you remember who's the boss. You know who I am, little cousin?"**

Then it struck me why this guy looked familiar. He had the same vicious sneer as some of the kids at Camp Half-Blood, the ones from cabin five.

"You're Clarisse's dad," I said. "Ares, god of war."

"Clarisse's dad. Most people say the god of war part first," Ares put his chin in his palm leaning forward, red fire dancing wildly in his eye sockets.

Ares grinned and took off his shades. Where his eyes should've been, there was only fire, empty sockets glowing with miniature nuclear explosions. "That's right, punk. I heard you broke Clarisse's spear."

"She was asking for it."

"Probably. That's cool. I don't fight my kids' fights, you know?"

Ares nodded. That was a good philosophy to live by. He turned his head a little to see Aphrodite giving him a look of disbelief. A little more and he saw it wasn't only her.

"What? They're my kids! They have the spirit and the ability to deal with their problems on their own. They don't need me to fix everything for them and coddle them. And if they do? They're not real kids of the war god," Ares snarled.

Percy frowned, leaning towards his friends. "I remember Frank said Mars gave him a similar speech."

"Guess the gods don't change much," Jason smiled sardonically.

**What I'm here for—I heard you were in town. I got a little proposition for you."

The waitress came back with heaping trays of food—cheeseburgers, fries, onion rings, and chocolate shakes.

Ares handed her a few gold drachmas.

"Talk about an overpayment," Thalia said in surprise.

"Yeah, but it isn't exactly easy to exchange the drachmas for mortal money," Percy countered. "So really, she didn't get paid at all."

She looked nervously at the coins. "But, these aren't..."

Ares pulled out his huge knife and started cleaning his fingernails. "Problem, sweetheart?"

Hera stared at her son in disappointment. Where had she gone wrong?

Hestia bit back a frown of disapproval, overhearing Hera's thoughts. Hera would have had to parent
him at all in order to go wrong. Hestia wouldn't defend Ares' actions, but for Hera to act as if she had no part in why he was who he was, was just as wrong.

The waitress swallowed, then left with the gold.

"You can't do that," I told Ares. "You can't just threaten people with a knife."

"Look at you, lecturing the god of war," Hermes said impressed.

"They grow up so fast," Apollo sniffed, pretending to wipe away a tear. Percy grinned at the duo.

Ares laughed. "Are you kidding? I love this country. Best place since Sparta. Don't you carry a weapon, punk? You should. Dangerous world out there. Which brings me to my proposition. I need you to do me a favor."

"What? No! They already have a more important quest! Finding my master bolt!" Zeus immediately protested, outraged at the idea.

Dionysus looked ready to strangle someone from all the times he'd been interrupted from reading.

"What favor could I do for a god?"

"Something a god doesn't have time to do himself. It's nothing much. I left my shield at an abandoned water park here in town. I was going on a little ... date with my girlfriend.

"Oh, of course," Hephaestus cut in bitterly, why did he think things would change for them in the future? Aphrodite, on the other hand glared at Ares, the date had better be with her.

We were interrupted. I left my shield behind. I want you to fetch it for me."

"Why don't you go back and get it yourself?"

"That's the spirit!" Hephaestus boomed with glee.

Ares growled and Percy looked rather uncomfortable being put in the middle of the two gods' feud.

The fire in his eye sockets glowed a little hotter.

"Why don't I turn you into a prairie dog and run you over with my Harley? Because I don't feel like it.

"Ares you wouldn't," Poseidon warned.

"Of course not Uncle. Just a little warning to have more respect for the gods," Ares said with an air of innocence.

A god is giving you an opportunity to prove yourself, Percy Jackson. Will you prove yourself a coward?" He leaned forward. "Or maybe you only fight when there's a river to dive into, so your daddy can protect you."

"Now he's done it," Orion sighed and Theseus hung his head. The children of the sea god were known for their impulsiveness and Ares knew exactly how to push their buttons.

I wanted to punch this guy, but somehow, I knew he was waiting for that. Ares's power was
causing my anger. He'd love it if I attacked. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

"You're smarter than most," Athena complimented, knowing just how irritating Ares' presence could be.

Percy's eyes widened and he pinched himself. Then he hissed in pain. "Not a dream then," he blinked in surprise.

The archery twins and Hermes struggled not to laugh. Though that was definitely a trick Morpheus would choose to do, it was amusing that Percy thought it was so improbable for Athena to pay him a compliment.

"We're not interested," I said. "We've already got a quest."

"That's right they do!" Zeus said smugly.

Ares's fiery eyes made me see things I didn't want to see—blood and smoke and corpses on the battlefield. "I know all about your quest, punk. When that item was first stolen, Zeus sent his best out looking for it: Apollo, Athena, Artemis, and me, naturally. If I couldn't sniff out a weapon that powerful..." He licked his lips, as if the very thought of the master bolt made him hungry.

Zeus glared at his son murderously. No one, no one was allowed to be near the Master Bolt. He caressed the metal reassuringly. Next to him, Hera wondered why she was immortal. Or why she ever agreed to marry Zeus. This was almost worse than him cheating on her. Almost.

"Well...if I couldn't find it, you got no hope. Nevertheless, I'm trying to give you the benefit of the doubt. Your dad and I go way back. After all, I'm the one who told him my suspicions about old Corpse Breath."

"Corpse Breath?" Hades hissed, and then the rest of the sentence caught up with him. "YOU DID WHAT?" Hades' face was getting unnaturally red.

"Peace Brother. Let us read further," Hestia said hoping to prevent Hades from committing nepoticide. "And remember these events happen millenium in the future." Hades scowled but heeded Hestia's words.

"You told him Hades stole the bolt?"

"Sure. Framing somebody to start a war. Oldest trick in the book. I recognized it immediately. In a way, you got me to thank for your little quest."

Hades made strange grumbling noises. The Furies looked down at their Master worriedly. They didn't want to be the ones who had to face the brunt of his anger.

"Thanks," I grumbled.

"Hey, I'm a generous guy. Just do my little job, and I'll help you on your way. I'll arrange a ride west for you and your friends."

"That's nice?" Demeter offered cautiously, watching Hades carefully. Even Persephone wasn't able to calm him down, considering how he was clenching and unclenching his fists.

"We're doing fine on our own."
"Yeah, right. No money. No wheels. No clue what you're up against. Help me out, and maybe I'll tell you something you need to know. Something about your mom."

Now the other goddesses and Hermes all looked at Ares poisonously.


"No. That's war," Ares countered unapologetically.

"My mom?"

He grinned. "That got your attention. The water park is a mile west on Delancy. You can't miss it. Look for the Tunnel of Love ride."

"You two were together," Hephaestus concluded bitterly. Hera looked at her son sadly, seeing Aphrodite and Ares show no remorse.

"What interrupted your date?" I asked. "Something scare you off?"

That made Hephaestus grin. Unlike his mother, he didn't blame the kids. He blamed his wife and brother. They were the ones who he sought revenge on. He didn't notice Aphrodite give him an incredulous look, indicating she thought of him as a hypocrite.

Ares bared his teeth, but I'd seen his threatening look before on Clarisse. There was something false about it, almost like he was nervous.

"Nervous? I don't get nervous boy!" Ares snarled.

"You're lucky you met me, punk, and not one of the other Olympians. They're not as forgiving of rudeness as I am. I'll meet you back here when you're done. Don't disappoint me."

After that I must have fainted, or fallen into a trance,


because when I opened my eyes again, Ares was gone. I might've thought the conversation had been a dream, but Annabeth and Grover's expressions told me otherwise.

"Not good," Grover said. "Ares sought you out, Percy. This is not good."

"Not good?" Ares snarled. Dionysus and Hermes looked at one another and simultaneously rolled their eyes.

I stared out the window. The motorcycle had disappeared.

Did Ares really know something about my mom, or was he just playing with me? Now that he was gone, all the anger had drained out of me. I realized Ares must love to mess with people's emotions. That was his power—cranking up the passions so badly, they clouded your ability to think.

That made Ares smirk and he finally sat back smugly. Aphrodite looked upwards in exasperation. She certainly enjoyed this particular ability of his, though she wasn't overjoyed he'd rather use them
in battle than with her.

"It's probably some kind of trick," I said. "Forget Ares. Let's just go."

"We can't," Annabeth said. "Look, I hate Ares as much as anybody,

"Hey!" Ares protested angrily.

Seeing his reaction, some of the more peace-loving gods and goddesses thought that they didn't blame Annabeth for having such an opinion.

"Agreed," Percy muttered to his friends on the other hand.

but you don't ignore the gods unless you want serious bad fortune. He wasn't kidding about turning you into a rodent."

I looked down at my cheeseburger, which suddenly didn't seem so appetizing.

"Way to ruin food Ares," Hermes shook his head.

Apollo stared at Ares mournfully, "how could you do such a thing?" Ares twitched but said nothing.

"Why does he need us?"

"Maybe it's a problem that requires brains," Annabeth said. "Ares has strength. That's all he has. Even strength has to bow to wisdom sometimes."

"Words to live by," Athena said softly. Her gaze fell to Triton, she was starting to have an idea.

"But this water park ... he acted almost scared. What would make a war god run away like that?"

Hephaestus cackled quietly making his wife and brother stare at him as if he were a lunatic. Hera sighed. Those three were worse than the drama any other god had ever created.

Annabeth and Grover glanced nervously at each other.

Annabeth said, "I'm afraid we'll have to find out."

Poseidon and Athena stared at the trio, realizing that their children were going to be caught in their problems. At least Hephaestus had the decency to look sheepish.

The sun was sinking behind the mountains by the time we found the water park. Judging from the sign, it once had been called WATERLAND, but now some of the letters were smashed out, so it read WAT R A D.

The main gate was padlocked and topped with barbed wire. Inside, huge dry waterslides and tubes and pipes curled everywhere, leading to empty pools. Old tickets and advertisements fluttered around the asphalt. With night coming on, the place looked sad and creepy.

"If Ares brings his girlfriend here for a date," I said, staring up at the barbed wire, "I'd hate to see what she looks like."

"Excuse me!?" Aphrodite shrieked loudly, busting the eardrums of those around her.
"I didn't know it was you!" Percy defended almost immediately. Aphrodite quieted down, sending Percy resentful looks.

"Percy," Annabeth warned. "Be more respectful."

"I'd listen to her," Aphrodite shot in. Percy sighed, this was going to be another long chapter.

"Why? I thought you hated Ares."

"He's still a god. And his girlfriend is very temperamental."

"Temperamental?" Aphrodite repeated.

"Oh stop," Artemis interrupted her.

"You don't want to insult her looks," Grover added.

"Just look at you. They aren't wrong," Artemis sighed tired of Aphrodite complaining about it already.

"Who is she? Echidna?"

"See? I really didn't know," Percy explained trying to placate the irate goddess. She huffed but nodded.

"No, Aphrodite," Grover said, a little dreamily. "Goddess of love."

"I thought she was married to somebody," I said. "Hephaestus."

"She is," the god in question spat out.

"Oh stop acting so innocent. You've had affairs with other mortals and immortals as well," Aphrodite finally said, fed up with his attitude. "You even tried to be with Athena! I've never said anything about it!"

Athena winced at the reminder, as Hephaestus and Aphrodite glared at one another.

"What's your point?" he asked.

"Oh." I suddenly felt the need to change the subject.

"Good idea," Hades laughed seeing the awkwardness in the room getting palpable.

"So how do we get in?"

"Maia!" Grover's shoes sprouted wings.

He flew over the fence, did an unintended somersault in midair,

"Awesome!" Hermes cried out in delight, "I love doing that!"

Apollo hummed unhappily. Hermes had abandoned him that way many times before.

then stumbled to a landing on the opposite side. He dusted off his jeans, as if he'd planned the whole thing. "You guys coming?"
The immortals and demigods started snickering. They all could imagine the looks on Percy and Annabeth's faces.

Annabeth and I had to climb the old-fashioned way, holding down the barbed wire for each other as we crawled over the top.

The shadows grew long as we walked through the park, checking out the attractions. There was Ankle Biter Island, Head Over Wedgie, and Dude, Where's My Swimsuit?

"Creative," Persephone remarked, slightly disturbed. "This is an amusement park for children?"

"Don't know why it bothers you," Demeter taunted. "You've seen things far worse in the Underworld."

"Mother!"

No monsters came to get us. Nothing made the slightest noise.

We found a souvenir shop that had been left open. Merchandise still lined the shelves: snow globes, pencils, postcards, and racks of—

"Clothes," Annabeth said. "Fresh clothes."

The demigods all moaned in pleasure. "Clean clothes."

"Without monster guts on them."

"It's a luxury."

The gods and goddesses all wrinkled their noses in disgust. Were the demigods trying to tell them that they couldn't be hygienic during quests? Was it that hard to remain clean?

"Yeah," I said. "But you can't just—"

"Watch me."

She snatched an entire row of stuff of the racks and disappeared into the changing room. A few minutes later she came out in Waterland flower-print shorts, a big red Waterland T-shirt, and commemorative Waterland surf shoes. A Waterland backpack was slung over her shoulder, obviously stuffed with more goodies.

Hermes applauded wholeheartedly. "My blessings are with her. May she steal to her heart's content."

The future demigods deadpanned but shrugged. Percy sniggered, "I can't wait to tell Annabeth that." That set Thalia and Nico off. For a good couple minutes all they could do was laugh hysterically. It sounded a little forced, but they all seemed happy enough.

"What the heck." Grover shrugged. Soon, all three of us were decked out like walking advertisements for the defunct theme park.

We continued searching for the Tunnel of Love. I got the feeling that the whole park was holding its breath. "So Ares and Aphrodite," I said, to keep my mind off the growing dark, "they have a thing going?"
The duo in question sighed. Why did people always have to question it?


"Thank you," Artemis said. "I am not sitting here to listen about Aphrodite's love life."

"I wouldn't want to tell you about my love life either," Aphrodite shot back.

"What about Aphrodite's husband?"

"Well, you know," she said. "Hephaestus. The blacksmith. He was crippled when he was a baby, thrown off Mount Olympus by Zeus."

"Hera. It was Hera. Why do people always blame me?" Zeus demanded in frustration.

"You seem believable," Poseidon told his brother. Zeus groaned.

So he isn't exactly handsome. Clever with his hands, and all, but Aphrodite isn't into brains and talent, you know?"

"She likes bikers."

"Whatever."

"Hephaestus knows?"

"Oh sure," Annabeth said. "He caught them together once. I mean, literally caught them, in a golden net, and invited all the gods to come and laugh at them."

"Good times," Hephaestus said blissfully as the other gods held back laughter in the memory.

Ares and Aphrodite looked murderous.

Hephaestus is always trying to embarrass them. That's why they meet in out-of-the-way places, like…"

She stopped, looking straight ahead. "Like that."

In front of us was an empty pool that would've been awesome for skateboarding.

"Is that a good thing?" Apollo asked cautiously. Thalia and Percy nodded. "Oh good, it seemed as if you all only encountered bad things."

"Oh, then never mind. It's not actually a good thing. We meant skateboarding is a good thing," Percy clarified.

It was at least fifty yards across and shaped like a bowl.

Around the rim, a dozen bronze statues of Cupid stood guard with wings spread and bows ready to fire.

"You went on a date where statues of your son were everywhere?" Persephone asked in disbelief.

"We haven't done it yet, but he's a representation of love. What's wrong with it?" Aphrodite defended. That only served to earn her strange looks.
On the opposite side from us, a tunnel opened up, probably where the water flowed into when the pool was full. The sign above it read, THRILL RIDE O' LOVE: THIS IS NOT YOUR PARENTS' TUNNEL OF LOVE!

Grover crept toward the edge. "Guys, look."

Marooned at the bottom of the pool was a pink-and-white two-seater boat with a canopy over the top and little hearts painted all over it.

The others winced. Aphrodite swooned, just thinking about how gorgeous and romantic the boat was. Ares smiled at his girlfriend reassuringly, though inwardly he winced.

In the left seat, glinting in the fading light, was Ares's shield, a polished circle of bronze.

"This is too easy," I said. "So we just walk down there and get it?"

The others all looked towards Percy in pity.


"Nothing is ever that easy," Perseus shook his head. Percy rolled his eyes but nodded in agreement.

Annabeth ran her fingers along the base of the nearest Cupid statue.

"There's a Greek letter carved here," she said. "Eta. I wonder..."

Several immortals and mortals turned to glare at Hephaestus. It's one thing to plot against Ares and Aphrodite, another to hurt demigods and satyrs in the process.

"Grover," I said, "you smell any monsters?"

He sniffed the wind. "Nothing."

"Who needs monsters when you have automatons?" Hephaestus asked proudly.

Athena, Hermes, Dionysus and Poseidon glared at him, and he quailed under its strength.

"Nothing—like, in-the-Arch-and-you-didn't-smell-Echidna nothing, or really nothing?"

"That was just mean," Thalia told Percy. "Grover tried his best," she hit him on his arm lightly, knowing he didn't mean it.

Percy patted Thalia's hand, feeling her quiver with unease.

Grover looked hurt. "I told you, that was underground."

"Okay, I'm sorry." I took a deep breath. "I'm going down there."

"I'll go with you." Grover didn't sound too enthusiastic, but I got the feeling he was trying to make up for what had happened in St. Louis.

"Grover is such a wonderful satyr!" Hermes beamed. "All of Pan's subjects are like that." A beat, and then his face fell. Artemis and Apollo both reached out to comfort him. Hermes nodded thankfully to them both.
"No," I told him. "I want you to stay up top with the flying shoes. You're the Red Baron, a flying ace, remember? I'll be counting on you for backup, in case something goes wrong."

"Good encouragement. That'll make him feel better too," Ariadne smiled towards Percy. Dionysus paused in his reading for a breath, annoyance seeping into him. He clenched his jaw and continued.

Grover puffed up his chest a little. "Sure. But what could go wrong?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling. Annabeth, come with me—"

Aphrodite shrieked. Others held their ears. Apollo had to stop the reading so he could heal the mortals' ruptured eardrums. The magic allowed for quick healing, otherwise all of the mortals and Zoë had permanently lost their hearing.

Aphrodite giggled in apology, but for the mortals her melodious voice was like nails being scraped on a blackboard. Torturous.

Dionysus shook his head, even further annoyed, and began to read once more.

"Are you kidding?" She looked at me as if I'd just dropped from the moon. Her cheeks were bright red.

"What's the problem now?" I demanded.

"Me, go with you to the ... the 'Thrill Ride of Love'? How embarrassing is that? What if somebody saw me?"

"Who's going to see her?" Thalia asked puzzled.

"Forget it. You won't understand. You're allergic to love," Nico told her loftily.

"Oh as if you know so much about it," Thalia shot back.

"Guys!" Jason interrupted. Both quieted. Percy grinned, it was nice seeing them act normally.

"Who's going to see you?" But my face was burning now, too. Leave it to a girl to make everything complicated.

"Hey!" All the females in the room argued.

"Fine," I told her. "I'll do it myself." But when I started down the side of the pool, she followed me, muttering about how boys always messed things up.

"Point," the females all said once again in unison. The males in the room looked on in awe at the easy hypocrisy.

We reached the boat. The shield was propped on one seat, and next to it was a lady's silk scarf. I tried to imagine Ares and Aphrodite here, a couple of gods meeting in a junked-out amusement-park ride. Why? Then I noticed something I hadn't seen from up top: mirrors all the way around the rim of the pool, facing this spot. We could see ourselves no matter which direction we looked. That must be it. While Ares and Aphrodite were smooching with each other they could look at their favorite people: themselves.

A beat. Then another. A glance at Ares and Aphrodite's furious, bright red faces. The entire room
burst into hysteric laughter.

"They truly are worse than Narcissus!" Persephone gasped after a while.

"The vainest creatures I've ever met," Demeter acknowledge through her laughs.

The demigods stopped laughing at the mention of Narcissus. They hadn't realized the gods laughed about the fates of mortals. It wasn't pleasant.

I picked up the scarf. It shimmered pink, and the perfume was indescribable—rose, or mountain laurel. Something good.

"Of course, it's something good! It belongs to me after all," Aphrodite huffed, still furious.

I smiled, a little dreamy, and was about to rub the scarf against my cheek when Annabeth ripped it out of my hand and stuffed it in her pocket. "Oh, no you don't. Stay away from that love magic."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Aphrodite smirked, mischief lighting up her kaleidoscope eyes.

"What?"

"Just get the shield, Seaweed Brain, and let's get out of here."

The moment I touched the shield, I knew we were in trouble. My hand broke through something that had been connecting it to the dashboard. A cobweb, I thought, but then I looked at a strand of it on my palm and saw it was some kind of metal filament, so fine it was almost invisible. A trip wire.

"Gods that's a good trap for Ares and Aphrodite but they're just children," Hermes sighed. Apollo nodded solemnly.

Hephaestus shrugged helplessly. "Not like I knew it would be demigods instead."

"Now you do," Apollo pointed out. Hephaestus nodded, as Ares and Aphrodite scowled.

"Wait," Annabeth said.

"Too late."

"There's another Greek letter on the side of the boat, another Eta. This is a trap."

"Too late honey," Alecto cackled.

Percy and Nico shuddered simultaneously. In their opinion, honey was not an endearment Alecto should use. Ever.

Noise erupted all around us, of a million gears grinding, as if the whole pool were turning into one giant machine.

"Oh a pool? Yeah they'll be fine," Triton dismissed.

Perseus and Theseus who were staring at Percy in a mixture of fear and anger, shot Triton a look of disbelief.
"He's not wrong," Orion pointed out. Perseus and Theseus shook their heads at him in betrayal.

Grover yelled, "Guys!"

Up on the rim, the Cupid statues were drawing their bows into firing position. Before I could suggest taking cover, they shot, but not at us. They fired at each other, across the rim of the pool. Silky cables trailed from the arrows, arcing over the pool and anchoring where they landed to form a huge golden asterisk. Then smaller metallic threads started weaving together magically between the main strands, making a net.

Hephaestus made a mental note about the machinery. It was a similar concept to the golden net, but far more advanced. Too bad it had been wasted on children.

"We have to get out," I said.

"Duh!" Annabeth said.

I grabbed the shield and we ran, but going up the slope of the pool was not as easy as going down.

"There's no water in it," Percy clarified.

Perseus and Theseus froze in fear. Triton rolled his eyes. "Still a pool. He'll find water. Calm down."
The two nodded stiffly.

"Come on!" Grover shouted.

He was trying to hold open a section of the net for us, but wherever he touched it, the golden threads started to wrap around his hands.

Hephaestus gave a sheepish shrug. "It was to prevent someone else from helping those two," he said gesturing to his wife and brother.

The Cupids' heads popped open. Out came video cameras. Spotlights rose up all around the pool, blinding us with illumination, and a loudspeaker voice boomed: "Live to Olympus in one minute...Fifty-nine seconds, fifty-eight..."

"So you three were on reality TV?" Thalia asked drily.

"See why I'm not a fan?"

"Hephaestus!" Annabeth screamed. "I'm so stupid. 'Eta is H.' He made this trap to catch his wife with Ares. Now we're going to be broadcast live to Olympus and look like absolute fools!"

"Fools? Not quite. Doomed demigods, most certainly but not fools," Apollo said reassuringly. Artemis rolled her eyes but smiled at her brother regardless.

We'd almost made it to the rim when the row of mirrors opened like hatches and thousands of tiny metallic things poured out.

Annabeth screamed.

It was an army of wind-up creepy-crawlies: bronze-gear bodies, spindly legs, little pincer
mouths, all scuttling toward us in a wave of clacking, whirring metal.

"Spiders!" Annabeth said. "Sp—sp—aaaah!"

Athena sat up straight in her throne. "Spiders?" She questioned sharply.

"Arachne's revenge," Nico said quietly. Athena closed her eyes, once again sorry her pride and anger was causing such trouble for her children.

I'd never seen her like this before. She fell backward in terror and almost got overwhelmed by the spider robots before I pulled her up and dragged her back toward the boat.

Athena winced, wondering just how Arachne's children had been able to strike such fear into the hearts of her children.

The things were coming out from all around the rim now, millions of them, flooding toward the center of the pool, completely surrounding us. I told myself they probably weren't programmed to kill, just corral us and bite us and make us look stupid. Then again, this was a trap meant for gods. And we weren't gods.

Hephaestus grimaced. "The kid ain't wrong. Any of the traps I set now for those two would be lethal for a demigod. Can't imagine things would've changed in the future."

"Not helping," Perseus shot his half-brother an exasperated look.

Annabeth and I climbed into the boat. I started kicking away the spiders as they swarmed aboard. I yelled at Annabeth to help me, but she was too paralyzed to do much more than scream.

"Oh great," Triton snarked.

"This one isn't her fault." Percy spoke up.

Ares nodded. "Punk's right. It isn't something she could help. Phobos and Deimos take their jobs very seriously." Triton just rolled his eyes in response.

"Thirty, twenty-nine," called the loudspeaker.

The spiders started spitting out strands of metal thread, trying to tie us down. The strands were easy enough to break at first, but there were so many of them, and the spiders just kept coming. I kicked one away from Annabeth's leg and its pincers took a chunk out of my new surf shoe.

Aphrodite shivered, throwing a look of disbelief towards her husband. "You wanted to set those creepy things on me?" Lowly she muttered to herself, "And people blame me for what I do?"

Hephaestus glared at her, but a look from Zeus prevented him from arguing.

Grover hovered above the pool in his flying sneakers, trying to pull the net loose, but it wouldn't budge.

Think, I told myself. Think.

"Don't hurt yourself," Thalia joked weakly trying to brighten the mood. It didn't work.
The Tunnel of Love entrance was under the net. We could use it as an exit, except that it was blocked by a million robot spiders.

"Fifteen, fourteen," the loudspeaker called.

Water, I thought. Where does the ride's water come from?

"Tell me you find water," Theseus pleaded.

Percy shrugged. "I'm here aren't I?" Theseus and Perseus glared at him. That was not what they needed to hear right now.

Then I saw them: huge water pipes behind the mirrors, where the spiders had come from. And up above the net, next to one of the Cupids, a glass-windowed booth that must be the controller's station.

"Grover!" I yelled. "Get into that booth! Find the 'on' switch!"

Nico and Jason realized what Percy was trying to do simultaneously. Nico breathed a sigh of relief while Jason threw Percy a look of respect.

"But—"

"Do it!" It was a crazy hope, but it was our only chance. The spiders were all over the prow of the boat now. Annabeth was screaming her head off. I had to get us out of there.

Grover was in the controller's booth now, slamming away at the buttons.

"Five, four—"

Grover looked up at me hopelessly, raising his hands. He was letting me know that he'd pushed every button, but still nothing was happening.

They were all staring at Percy as if he were a dead man walking. Percy rolled his eyes. "Guys this was years ago. I'm fine! We're all fine! Please calm down!"

His words seemed to only incite more worry as everyone began to urge Dionysus to read faster, much to Dionysus' ire.

I closed my eyes and thought about waves, rushing water, the Mississippi River. I felt a familiar tug in my gut. I tried to imagine that I was dragging the ocean all the way to Denver.

Poseidon smiled. He loved seeing his children grow into their powers. Getting a first hand look into how it felt for them though was a brand new experience. An experience that Poseidon intended to fully take.

"Two, one, zero!"

Water exploded out of the pipes. It roared into the pool, sweeping away the spiders. I pulled Annabeth into the seat next to me and fastened her seat belt just as the tidal wave slammed into our boat, over the top, whisking the spiders away and dousing us completely, but not capsizing us. The boat turned, lifted in the flood, and spun in circles around the whirlpool.
"Thank the gods."

"It's not over yet." Dionysus drawled making everyone go back to their former state of intense tension.

The water was full of short-circuiting spiders, some of them smashing against the pool's concrete wall with such force they burst.

Spotlights glared down at us. The Cupid-cams were rolling, live to Olympus.

"The pressure to make it be a good show," Jason joked.

"Oh who cares about that?" Thalia snapped. Jason shook his head at his sister. So she was allowed to make jokes but he wasn't? Real cool.

But I could only concentrate on controlling the boat. I willed it to ride the current, to keep away from the wall. Maybe it was my imagination, but the boat seemed to respond.

"Not your imagination," Amphitrite told Percy without looking at him.

At least, it didn't break into a million pieces. We spun around one last time, the water level now almost high enough to shred us against the metal net. Then the boat's nose turned toward the tunnel and we rocketed through into the darkness.

Annabeth and I held tight, both of us screaming as the boat shot curls and hugged corners and took forty-five-degree plunges past pictures of Romeo and Juliet and a bunch of other Valentine's Day stuff.

"Makes sense Aphrodite and Ares wanted to have a date their. I wonder who's idea it was?" Artemis mused drily.

Then we were out of the tunnel, the night air whistling through our hair as the boat barreled straight toward the exit.

If the ride had been in working order, we would've sailed off a ramp between the golden Gates of Love and splashed down safely in the exit pool. But there was a problem. The Gates of Love were chained. Two boats that had been washed out of the tunnel before us were now piled against the barricade—one submerged, the other cracked in half.

"Unfasten your seat belt," I yelled to Annabeth.

"Are you crazy?"

"Definitely. But I had the only idea that got us out of there alive," Percy shrugged.

The others all shook their heads at him in disbelief. He really was crazy if he was gonna admit to being crazy.

"Unless you want to get smashed to death." I strapped Ares's shield to my arm. "We're going to have to jump for it." My idea was simple and insane. As the boat struck, we would use its force like a springboard to jump the gate. I'd heard of people surviving car crashes that way, getting thrown thirty or forty feet away from an accident. With luck, we would land in the pool.
Perseus and Theseus began to calm down when Thalia and Nico groaned loudly.

"Luck. With luck?! How'd you survive? You have no luck."

Percy looked affronted but he pointed towards the book.

Annabeth seemed to understand. She gripped my hand as the gates got closer.

"On my mark," I said.

"No! On my mark!"

They all made sounds of understanding then.

"No wonder." Percy pouted but said nothing.

"What?"

"Simple physics!" she yelled. "Force times the trajectory angle—"

"Fine." I shouted. "On your mark!"

"You just agreed so she wouldn't talk about physics," Apollo stated.

"Can you blame me?" Apollo shook his head, paused then shrugged. "Too soon to know if I agree or not."

She hesitated...hesitated...then yelled, "Now!"

Crack!

Annabeth was right. If we'd jumped when I thought we should've, we would've crashed into the gates. She got us maximum lift.

"I'm so surprised," Nico said blandly.

"I know. It's remarkable. Annabeth was right? And Percy was wrong?" Thalia asked exaggerating her tone. Percy rolled his eyes at them both.

Unfortunately, that was a little more than we needed. Our boat smashed into the pileup and we were thrown into the air, straight over the gates, over the pool, and down toward solid asphalt.

Hermes paled. "Something tells me that's as bad as what Percy's timing would've gotten."

Thalia and Nico nodded.

Something grabbed me from behind.

Annabeth yelled, "Ouch!"

"Not another monster," Orion asked worriedly. Percy grinned and shook his head.

Grover!
"How awesome are satyrs?" Hermes asked rhetorically.

"Understatement," all of the future demigods called out.

In midair, he had grabbed me by the shirt, and Annabeth by the arm, and was trying to pull us out of a crash landing, but Annabeth and I had all the momentum. "You're too heavy!" Grover said. "We're going down!"

We spiraled toward the ground, Grover doing his best to slow the fall.

Zeus raised a brow wondering if that meant Poseidon's brat was in his domain. As if she could hear his thoughts, Hera glared at him. I can, she spoke into his mind crossly, shaking her head at his sheepish look.

We smashed into a photo-board, Grover's head going straight into the hole where tourists would put their faces, pretending to be Noo-Noo the Friendly Whale. Annabeth and I tumbled to the ground, banged up but alive. Ares's shield was still on my arm.

"That stupid shield," Percy muttered. At the same time, Ares was ecstatic that his shield had made it out safe and sound.

Once we caught our breath, Annabeth and I got Grover out of the photo-board and thanked him for saving our lives. I looked back at the Thrill Ride of Love. The water was subsiding. Our boat had been smashed to pieces against the gates.

The demigods of past and future all winced, realizing how close Percy and Annabeth had come to death.

"Can you do anything without it turning into a near death experience?" Thalia asked. Percy thought about it and then sadly shook his head. Perseus and Theseus groaned.

A hundred yards away, at the entrance pool, the Cupids were still filming. The statues had swiveled so that their cameras were trained straight on us, the spotlights in our faces.

"Show's over!" I yelled. "Thank you! Good night!"

"See you all next time on Percy's Crazy Adventures," Apollo joked.

Percy shook his head. "Nah, I hate reality TV."

The Cupids turned back to their original positions. The lights shut off. The park went quiet and dark again, except for the gentle trickle of water into the Thrill Ride of Love's exit pool. I wondered if Olympus had gone to a commercial break, or if our ratings had been any good.

There was a pause of silence before the room burst into laughter. It was a stupid comment but its normalcy relieved the tension in the room.

I hated being teased. I hated being tricked. And I had plenty of experience handling bullies who liked to do that stuff to me. I hefted the shield on my arm and turned to my friends. "We need to have a little talk with Ares."

"And that's the end of the chapter," Dionysus closed the book. "I'll read next," Poseidon offered. Dionysus tossed the book over and he flipped to the write page. Clearing his throat,
Chapter End Notes

(1) I don't why, but I'm talking it as canon that Malcolm -son of Athena, has a crush on Kayla -daughter of Apollo. It's a kind of a headcanon really, but it's real as far as the fic is concerned. I don't know if they're in a relationship but Malcolm certainly likes her. Very much.

Poor Hades. The injustice is so real in this book. I am considering whether it would be worth him blowing up. Kind of. I really want to. Maybe.

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