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## **Chapter 1: Bullshit**

I have found out that I enjoy writing SI-OC stories, mostly bringing common sense in fantasy worlds that I find full with illogical holes of some kind. I read the Percy Jackson series and honestly found a refreshing take on mythology, people that already read my stuff know that I have a soft spot for it. So, I'll play around with a demigod, and like always, I'll try to make sense of a world in which magic and whatnot are explained in a blurry way at best. That's the main reason behind my choice of character; beyond that, I'll be playing around a lot, that is the purpose of fanfiction. I'll try to keep my facts aligned with the books as much as I can, only adding a tiny bit of realism here and there.

Since my stories are from the POV of a more or less jaded character, they come out showing a bit more the dark side of the worlds they are written in. But... that's kind of the point.

Feel free to point out what does not make sense in your heads and spare me your angsty outbursts.

I don't own shit beyond my character.

Have Fun!

**Thanks to Megapede for the beta-work!**

## **BULLSHIT**

The forest was vast and different from anything else I had ever seen.

I was a kid, barely five years old, and I had memories of at least two other lives before this one, so I knew what I was talking about. The woman who raised me, a certain Helen, told me she was my sister, and more importantly, she was a motherfucking witch, which explained the absurdities of my home. I finished my usual break-neck run across the tall trunks (never leaving the trail) and walked into a garden that held a distinctly

Mediterranean feel: myrtle, elderflower, laurel trees, I easily recognized a couple of olive trees.

The hut where I lived had grass over its roof, and a goat quietly munching over it, a chimney made with river stones, round and flat ones, with smoke leaving a trail up to the canopy of leaves which rarely let the sunshine through.

Thanks to my sister's lessons, I knew that we lived in the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska, which was the largest national forest in the United States at 16.7million acres, 68,000 square kilometers. Most of its area was part of the temperate rain forest, itself part of the larger Pacific temperate rain forest. Naturally, the forest was so much bigger without actually occupying the planet's surface that it was hilarious.

The important element that few considered was that the forest had been there since the last Ice Age, with only a few humans walking on the outskirts of it only in the last few centuries. In a place full of life, like that vast forest was, nature sings its tune. And where humans do not thread, magic learns to dance.

Never constrained, never marred by humans, the forest had grown. Every single tree, young or old, held more sway in the deep of the forest than any human could ever hope to understand. It was defined as an old-growth forest, also termed primary forest, virgin forest, primeval forest, late seral forest, or forest primeval.

Not to say that the forest or the single trees were sentient, no, but they were undoubtedly aware. Luckily, with my mother being a witch and me being born in the forest, I was safe, even if I refused to stray from the path.

I had never been one for respecting what others see as holy, but that place was a sanctuary.

Since my previous lives had, at least following my memories, actually happened, I had somewhat an open mind. Even so, the ground did not make any sense. Following the ling trail that moved in strange patterns around our home, sometimes I walked uphill, sometimes I slid down what felt like a grass-covered cliff. It was maddening. Or it would have been, if not for the kindly reassuring tune, the charm around my neck kept up, humming for my benefit, reminding the forest of my mother's power and friendship.

The forest, while from time to time, intimidating, was nothing short of otherworldly. There were thousands of western red cedar, Sitka spruce, and western hemlock everywhere. Limestone and granite that made the ground beneath the soil also made hills and caves. Creeks became torrents and ended up in little waterfalls, the water spraying a thin sheen of vapor over the ponds and occasionally birthing a rainbow, answering the rare touch of the sun.

All that mystery and lively thrum in the air, however, paled in confront with the magic inside my home. Once I had closed behind me the small oak door with a bronze brass, I took in the rest of the hut.

Circular, with a diameter of easily fifteen meters, it had regularly spaced windows along its wall, which was made of piled fluvial stones held together by thankfully not poisonous ivy. The monotony of the circular wall was also broken by a cheerfully lit fireplace, and shelves upon shelves of books and scrolls. I looked with loathing at the shelves reserved for my non-magical studies.

Ugh, it doesn't matter how long I live; there are so many times I can study math from the start. I sighed.

Even if I was sure I had lived before, the memories of my previous lives, while consistent and bright, were hazy at best on the emotional side. I remembered crying in desperation for something, but I couldn't remember why, I could remember having sex and falling in love, but not the warmth I felt then. Even names were something I couldn't recall at all.

I remembered that the first time I was reborn, I had to figure out everything from the fact that I was given another chance at life, to where and when I was, to what to do.

This time I had much less freedom of choice, but I wasn't bothered by it, somehow, even having an old soul, albeit, with toned-down memories, I still had all the childishness typical of... well, the child I was.

I glanced at the tall mirror on the side of the room, a curly and blond-haired child with heterochromatic eyes staring me back. My left eye bottle green, the color of my iris behaving like glass, changing its shade with the light, while the other was of a smoke-ish dark gray, with the occasional silver spark in it.

If those eyes didn't confirm the existence of magic, nothing would.

My still childishly chubby face hid the features I would one day have, but my nose was small and straight, and my chin almost sharp.

I then looked upwards, like always awed at the absolute darkness that lingered between the wooden beams that sustained the roof and the ceiling proper. I lowered my gaze and let it land on the two single beds, which doubled as benches for the long oak table and looked at my sister, bent over an uninteresting book on human anatomy.

My strange witch-mother, of whom I shared the grey-eye, sharp chin, and admittedly wicked grin. I narrowed my eyes, looking for it.

They were like particles of dust suspended in the air and hit by a ray of sun. I could see them with the corner of my eye, almost beyond my perception, but not quite.

I focused on it, seeing the particles of dust looking more and more like sparks suspended in a golden mist, and forcing my will, I parted the charm on the cover of the book, discovering an ancient-looking, leather-bound tome.

My sister closed it with a snap, her eyes finding mine and her lips turning in a mocking smirk. "It's far too early for you to deal with this." She spoke in ancient greek, the language singing in my head and words falling in place like pieces of a puzzle.

I huffed, not raising to the bait. "But since you are so curious..." She started, and my eyes snapped back on her like magnets, "... I will get you started on runes, what do you say?"

I smiled, running towards her and quickly climbing on the bench. I had an idea as to why we spoke greek even while being in the Americas, and the dates on the more mundane books placed us after 1980, but more than that, I couldn't know.

My sister knew that I wasn't an ordinary child, if only because of my being furious when I discovered I was dyslexic. In my every life, I had been an avid reader, finding out that words were barely beyond my grasp had been, not nice. I had felt betrayed, and suddenly much more vulnerable.

My previous life experiences had managed to give me some sort of edge when dealing with either English or Japanese, but knowing that smooth reading would always be beyond me was dreadful.

It didn't help that I lived without any kind of technology. My sister and I made light with candles or torches, and cooked thanks to the fireplace, either in the shiny copper pot or on the flat volcanic stone. It wasn't bad, but I would have enjoyed just kicking back and watching a movie.

My sister ruffled my hair and took out a sheet of white paper, the pencil in her tapping it thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"What do you think is the purpose of runes, Icarus?" Her soothing tone asked me.

I hid a grimace at my name, it wasn't exactly a lucky one, but I understood that whoever named me, either my mother or my father, likely chose Icarus so that I could rise above the myth and actually reach the sun. That's some grade-A poetry right there.

"Well, ancient greek letters, besides being used for writing, don't have hidden meanings..." I started. "Not that I know of," I added, looking at my sister with narrowed eyes.

At her encouraging smile, I went on: "But alpha can mean a beginning, in the same way, beta can indicate a follower, and omega the end." I rubbed my chin, thinking about it.

"The real question would be why only these symbols have meaning, and why I can't make up one, or a whole alphabet." I continued.

My sister was beaming at me, and she bent forward: "What is the purpose of runes, Icarus?" she reminded me of her question.

I thought about it for a few seconds: "The one I give them? Since magic is also about intent?" I half answered, half asked.

She grabbed my face and kissed my forehead, a loud 'smooch' almost echoing in the hut.

Life, while a bit isolated, was good.

### Seven years later

Usually, a twelve years old kid does not just pack his stuff and leave the enchanted forest on his own. For several reasons, but mostly, because

1) why the fuck would one wish to leave a magic place?

and 2) He is fucking twelve.

That very polished and undoubtedly exact reasoning did not apply to me. One day, my sister had vanished, without a hello, or a goodbye, simply... puff. Her shit and books had disappeared with her, along with our goats and chickens, the usual absolute darkness between the wood beams supporting the roof and the actual ceiling gone with her. I recognized an eviction notice when I saw one.

I was feeling... hurt? betrayed? Something along those lines. Still, I had packed my stuff, got dressed, and left without looking back.

The forest had kept its uncaring attitude towards me, but I had been running in it for years, I felt that my welcome had come to an end.

I had donned my military cargo pants and brown leather boots, my cotton shirt, my wooden jumper, and my brown leather trench coat, the bag with my meager possessions on my back, and my bowie like knife secured at my waist. I had walked south for days, resting the least I could, continuously parting the confounding magic that tried to ensnare my senses, stopping only to eat my rations made of smoked salmon and drinking the apple juice I managed to bring with me.

I didn't want to sleep into an enchanted forest without protection, thank you very much. I tricked my body into not feeling tired, my muscles into not feeling the strain and my bones into not feeling the ache. My twelve years old body, while undoubtedly healthy, could only do so much. The days had blurred with the nights, and I kept going south.

After three days, the tall, unending trees and their oppressive leaves canopy let go of me. The difference was not evident to the untrained eye, but the wariness weighing on my shoulders had left me. I kept going, walking through the night, the light of the moon and stars was not enough to light my path, only to make me distinguish north from south, but I didn't mind. I had lived for years with absolute darkness above my head, having the nightly one all around me was not enough to paralyze me. At the dawn of the fourth day, the trees had parted, and I had reached the almost barren coastline. I let out a relieved sigh, suddenly feeling more at ease.

I reached a small clearing, and with the expertise gifted me by years of living in a forest, I brought together a vast amount of wood and organized rocks into a twenty centimeters tall circle with a half meter of diameter. I walked to the nearest tree and etched an alpha into it with a hand trembling for my deep tiredness. Walking a counterclockwise circle, my knife etched a horizontal line on the trunk of every other tree until I reached again the first one.

I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and opened them again. With the familiarity born from years of practice, I recognized the not-real and not-actually-there dust particles suspended in a ray of sunshine, changing my focus on them and seeing them as ever-burning sparks suspended in a misty-fog. I willed it to warp in a circle, anchoring itself to the marks I had made with my knife, and when I saw the misty wall fall in place, I etched an omega under the alpha, locking it in place.

I amassed a bunch of wood in my stone circle and emptied on it half of the oil flask I had brought with me. Running the head of my knife's hilt on its sheath, I produced a waterfall of sparks, on the wood, which immediately started smoking, and soon burning. I placed around the circle the rest of the wood so that the would somewhat dry thanks to the warmth of the fire.

I left the clearing for a few minutes, coming back with several pine branches I had cut with a razor-sharp steel wire. *It always pays to be prepared.*

I placed the branches in a makeshift bed, isolating me from the warmth-eating ground, and finally allowed myself to fall asleep, my bag as a cushion, my magic as a shield.

### A year later 12-may 1998

I was sitting at a coffee shop, lazily enjoying my continental breakfast, an eye on the paper I had taken from a nearby table.

"It will be fifteen bucks, kid." The waiter told me. If he found it strange that a thirteen years old kid was on his own, reading a paper and having a breakfast that could fill two grown-up men, he didn't voice it.

I looked at him, and with a relaxed, vague gesture, I replied, "These are not the droids you're looking for." warping the golden fog around his head with a lack of care.

"These are not the droids I'm looking for." The man replied before leaving me alone.

Reaching civilization had its perks, beyond being able to magically trick the equivalent of muggles into believing that I had already paid for whatever shit I took, I managed to take up a paper and find out exactly when I was. It was cold, I was a bit without direction, but it was cool. I had reached New York six months before through very skillful use of the buses and common, helpful muggles that offered me a lift in their car. Magic was awesome, and I could safely ignore the obvious danger of accepting lifts by unknown people. The only question was: what to do now? I sighed, considering my options.

There is only one rule in New York: everyone is a nutcase. And my growing up in a forest had left me ill-equipped to deal with both the loudness of the place and the polluted air. That was why I had started living in an abandoned mansion in long island. It was isolated enough and had both electricity and running water; it was more than enough for me.

I had cut my hair short, stole a beautiful brand new pair of sunglasses (Ray-Ban for the win), and took up wearing sneakers instead of leather boots. Otherwise, my attire hadn't changed much; sure, I had an impressive collection of t-shirts from this or that rock band and hoodies, my first childhood dreams of going all 'Assassin Creed' with a white hood had come real after all.

Not that I went around murdering people, or climbing strangely on buildings, even if I had picked up parkour, my endless stamina demanding it. But I enjoyed it nevertheless. There were no secret quests, no cabals of evil old men, and no monsters to kill. Well, there where monsters, a lot of them, but they didn't harm anyone. I didn't let them see me, cyclops, and whatnot were some bullshit I didn't want to deal with.

I wrapped myself in the fog that separated the world I lived in from the one ordinary humans frequented. I didn't wish to be seen, and so I wasn't. I eyed with a raised eyebrow the cyclops on the other side of the road, who was looking around suspiciously. I sighed; I had overstayed my welcome.

I walked to my loaded pick up (obviously stolen), and half an hour later, I reached the private road that led to my home. I felt the warped golden fog that I had folded in several layers and anchored with a lot of runes all over the place. I parked the pickup and started unloading the provisions I had taken whenever something struck my fancy. This time had been a leather armchair from a second-hand shop. I looked it with a heavy frown, I had ensnared the guy of the shop to help me with placing it on the loading floor of the pickup, and I didn't know how to take it down and take it beyond the few stairs that separated the ground from the door of the mansion.

I was strong for being thirteen years old, stronger than any preteen had any right to be, but I also didn't want to drop the comfy armchair on the ground.

I thought about it; briefly, it was going to be a hassle, but building some shit to low the armchair on the ground lightly was going to cost me both time and effort. I eyed the shovel resting against the wall... *If I found several of those, I could create some kind of ramp between the loading floor and the door...*

I sighed, climbing next to my new armchair and pushing it on the edge of the loading floor of the pickup.

"Please, don't break." I lifted my foot and pushed the chair down.

With a solid 'thump,' my new, beautiful leather armchair landed on the ground.

I sighed: "Nothing's ever easy." I muttered, unknowingly slipping into ancient greek.

19-June 1999

The night was annoyingly loud. No, scratch that, the rain was. There was so much thunder rumbling in the clouds that I was forced to warp the golden fog around the house to dampen the sounds coming from outside. It would last until morning, but still, what the fuck? In more than a year that I spent living in the once-abandoned mansion, I had never seen the sky behave like that.

I was enjoying a cup of tea in my armchair, distractedly reading the leather-bound book that was the collection of my observations on the magic of this world, trying to make head or tails out of it. The vinyl disc was spinning Midnight Rumbler, from the album 'Let it Bleed' of the Rolling Stones cheerfully opposing to the downpour outside.

However, I heard a clicking sound that was not part of the song, Immediately identifying it with a door being lockpicked. I narrowed my mismatched eyes in the direction of the sound. That meant people. Which indicated that my, modestly speaking, very skillful bending of what I had come to define 'natural magic' had failed.

Luckily, the kitchen-living room where I spent most of my relax-time and where I had set up my music system was also equipped with kitchen knives.

I had my loyal bowie strapped at my side, like always, but it was wiser preparing for war. I rose from my comfortable armchair and picked up a couple of knives from the kitchen drawer, wrapping myself with the 'natural magic' in a cocoon with several layers. I walked in the corner next to the door and squatted down in the natural shadows; I had left my steaming teacup balanced of the armrest of the armchair, hoping that the intruder would be led to believe I was still there, unaware.



Over the music and the still dampened sounds of the downpour outside, I heard them walk in, before carefully crossing the threshold as quietly as they could.

Leading the way, there was a girl between 10 and 13 years old, shoulder-length, spiky black hair, electric blue eyes, and freckles across her nose. She had delicate features, despite those almost fairy-like traits, she wore a black T-shirt, tattered black jeans, and a leather jacket she was lithe, almost slender, which at her apparent age was somewhat rare.

After the punk girl came in a kid who looked fifteen-ish, with brown curly hair and brown eyes, he was on the tall side, around 1,70 meters. But there was something... I looked, in the same way, I had been trained to look at things that were there-but-not-there, and the air parted itself around the legs of my target. *A fucking satyr? Really?* I thought. The inconsistencies of the world I had been living in, lined themselves together, presenting a worrying picture.

After the motherfucking satyr came in a little girl, around six years old, trembling for the cold, she looked like an almost drown kitten, her blond hair almost dark brown since she was drenched. She was clutching a bronze knife as long as her forearm, and that awoke a blurry memory of an old story I had read once, lives before.

The last one was a boy, clearly the oldest, with sandy blonde hair cut short, blue eyes, a sharp nose, a sneaky look, and a golf mace on his hand. He was the boss of the strange-looking group, defending the rear, while the punk-rocker was the heavy hitter, and I had an inkling as who the two in the middle were.

They moved in, their eyes darting everywhere and not stopping over my hidden form. I moved silently, my will over the golden fog smothering even the barest sound of my footsteps until I was behind the last of the group. I brought my arms forward, in a parody of a hug, until the knife in my left hand pointed just below the ribcage of the target, and the blade in my right was at a hair breath from his jugular. I could see his friends slowly crawling towards my empty armchair; the Rolling Stones uncaringly kept singing.

I suspected not only who they were, but also in which universe I was, but I was hardly reassured. If I knew something of this world, it was that fate was a bitch, and a very present one. "Normally, I would offer shelter to any child who asks." My voice cut the tense atmosphere, turning it into a rightly bellicose one. The shouts of surprise and the other three members of the group whirled on themselves ready for a fight.

"Ah, ah, ah." I tutted, making the knives known to my target skin: "A move and he dies." I spoke to the others, my eyes running over their forms.

"Your names and why you thought to crash in my home was a good idea." My eyes traveled to the six years old girl who was holding her knife so hard her hand was trembling. *But maybe it is fear.* I considered.

"And why you thought that giving a knife to a child was even remotely wise," I added as an afterthought.

The kid I was threatening with my knives was as still as a rock, knowing that moving backward would let me kill him with a knife in the lung, and that going forward would see him with a slit throat. Incredibly mature of him.

"L-l-l-lets just calm d-d-down." stammered the satyr.

"And I also want to know why the fuck three kids go around with a satyr," I added again.

That froze them. "You can see his legs?" the punk rocker asked, a frown developing on her face.

I raised an eyebrow, looking in her eyes. My silence underlined perfectly how much her question was stupid. She schooled her expression, and after glancing at the position of my knives on the body of her companion, her shoulders sagged a bit. I didn't relax my stance, and expertly ignored the outraged muttering of the five years old, knife-wielding, girl.

"My name is Thalia Grace." She introduced herself. Shit. I thought.

"I'm-m-m Gg-g-g-r-r-ove-r-r-r Und-de-e-er-woo-od." Stammered the gobsmacked satyr—double shit. I still hoped it wasn't true.

"Luke," Spoke the one under the threat of being killed "Luke Castellan, and the little one busy glaring daggers into your skull is Annabeth Chase."

"Bullshit." I sighed. It was the most eloquent answer I could come up with.

## **Chapter 2: Royal and Regular Bastards**

### **Thanks to Megapede for the beta-work!**

*My name is Thalia Grace." She introduced herself. Shit. I thought.*

*"I'm-m-m Gg-g-g-r-r-ove-r-r-r Und-de-e-er-woo-od." Stammered the gobsmacked satyr. Double shit. I still hoped it wasn't true. "Luke" Spoke the one under the threat of being killed "Luke Castellan, and the little one busy glaring daggers into your skull is Annabeth Chase."*

*"Bullshit." I sighed. It was the most eloquent answer I could come up with.*

"I'm going to let you go," I said. *Not that I have a choice.* "Do not attack me. It would be a hassle for everyone." Slowly, I distanced the knives from Luke and took a step back. The son of Hermes turned on himself, quickly but not in a threatening way. Uh, look at that, he's not an idiot.

I looked again at the trembling Annabeth, and my expression softened. I walked toward the kitchen table, where I put down the knives. "There's a bathroom on the next floor, with warm water, the first bedroom on the right after the stairs is mine, take clothes, and whatever you need to change, you'll be taking a cold otherwise." I calmly spoke.

I opened the refrigerator and started taking out stuff; I turned only to see Annabeth fiercely hugging Luke's waist, while he was trying to have a silent conversation with Thalia. I looked at Groover, tilting my head questioningly before taking out a cola can from the refrigerator and emptying it into a tall glass. I placed the aluminum on the table and looked expectantly at the satyr.

"I'm waiting for an explanation of what you are," I repeated, opening another drawer and taking out a first aid kit, sliding it on the table towards the others. I had seen their bruises and several scratches on their skin after all.

Luke and Thalia had seemingly reached an agreement, and the punk-girl led the younger one out of the room, I distractedly heard them hopping on the stairs.

"So..." Luke started, his eyes scanning me multiple times. "...we introduced ourselves, who are you?"

I had no intention of answering the question. "You still need to tell me what you are, since nobody ever managed to reach my house in the year and a half that I have been occupying it. And why the child held a knife as long as her forearm." They both sighed. I picked out a couple of onions and started cutting them into little cubes, lighting up the cooker and placing a pan over it, pouring some olive oil in it before getting started with the tomatoes.

So they started explaining. Well, Luke did. "Greek mythology is real."

I blinked, but I did not interrupt. *He should learn how to deliver critical information.*

I placed a boiler over another cooker and looked unimpressed at the demigod in front of me. "I'm..." he gritted his teeth "I'm a demigod, Thalia and Annabeth demi goddesses."

And then he gave me a resume of his last year of running across the continent. I poured the boiling water into a pot, switching it with the boiler over the still lit cooker, before throwing in it a handful of salt and pouring in 7 hg of pasta. "How did you cross the golden fog around this place?" I asked, tossing the diced tomatoes in the full pan along with the onions.

"I-i-it's called the Mist." Grover offered, his stuttering finally dying down.

"That is not the answer to the question I made, is it?" I objected—*shit shittity shit. Just my luck, I had to land in a world just about to face two divine wars.* So they started again, and between one and the other, they managed to give me a picture of the world we lived in. Ten minutes later, I poured the now cooked pasta into a colander, shaking it a little bit before tossing it all in the pan with the onions and tomatoes. I lowered the flame under it to the bare minimum and mixed the pasta with the vegetables.

"Grover got us lost, and Annabeth ran after an owl. We ended up here; the mansion looked abandoned..." Luke quipped. I turned my unimpressed mismatched eyes on the satyr, before sighing.

"The girls should be finished," I said, hearing the footsteps coming down the stairs. I picked a few basil leaves from the potted plant and tossed them into the pan, before taking out a chunk of Parmigiano (it had been a bitch stealing that) and grating it over the pasta.

I placed the pan in the middle of the table just when the girls came back in. Thalia had helped herself to my AC/DC T-shirt, and Annabeth looked dead on her feet. I slid five plates on the table and filled them, leaving some pasta in the pan for seconds. I ate first, reassuring them that it wasn't poisoned, while Grover happily devoured the coke can I had emptied before. Even in her exhausted state, Annabeth managed to give me a heated glare. I rolled my eyes: "I'm sorry I almost butchered you, but next time, knock."

Luke snorted: "It's okay; I would have done the same."

"But..." Annabeth whirled on him.

"But nothing," the son of Hermes interrupted, "We broke into his home; it's only right he is defensive... by the way, what's your name?"

I watched amusedly at Annabeth who looked at Thalia for her opinion, the older demigoddess simply shrugged: "It's fair." then her eyes narrowed, sparks dancing off her fingertips "But pull another stunt like that and I'll..."

"Glare cutely at me." I interrupted with a smile, "My name's Icarus. And I'm likely a demigod, so I'll come with you."

"Just like that?" Luke asked, preventing Thalia from reacting to my taunt.

"What were the odds of you three casually bumping into me?" I retorted, "I recognize a divine intervention when it bitchslaps me out of the blue. So yes, I'm coming with you, I don't fancy living in a house surrounded by whatever shit is hunting you. We can take the pickup tomorrow morning. Unless a god is charging at the head of the monsters following you, they'll roam in the surroundings. But the... Mist, was it? I used, it will hold only for so long."

Luke nodded slowly: "Sounds like a plan."

I finished my midnight pasta and rose from the kitchen table. "I'll need to pack. Spark-girl," I turned toward Thalia, who was already gritting her teeth "I do have some AC/DC albums." I pointed to my vinyl stash on the side of the records player. "Feel free to change the music." I turned and walked toward the door: "And no offense, Luke, Grover, but you stink. Take a goddamn shower." I said over my shoulder.

The following morning saw my unlikely company gathered into the kitchen/living room. I watched out of the window; the sky was still rumbling, the rain still heavily attempting to drown us. "Well, you look better," I said after a look at my unlikely companions. "Take whatever you want from the house. I'm abandoning it anyway."

I saw Thalia's eyes briefly dart to my stash of pieces of vinyl and snorted. "There is space on the loading floor of the pickup, go crazy." Half an hour later, I had finished securing under an oilskin all the shit that my four companions had deemed worthy of being taken away. "Thalia and Luke with the cargo, tie yourselves somewhere with that rope, I don't want to toss you away on a sharp turn," I advised.

I took the driver seat: "I'll drive, and Annabeth will keep an eye on Grover, who'll tell me where to go."

Luke nodded, and stopped Annabeth from objecting: "Thalia and I will toss around the monsters if they try to jump on us, and I'd feel better if you were to keep an eye on our last team member."

He shot me an apologetic glance there, I simply rolled my eyes and smirked, giving Annabeth something safe to do was on the priority list of everyone, and since Grover didn't know how to drive, leaving the son of Hermes, and the daughter of Zeus together was our best bet. They knew each other, and they knew how to fight together in case it was necessary, and something in my gut told me we were going to need them.

I turned on the pickup, and we hit the road. While listening to Grover's indications, my eyes were darting all around the sides of the road, and my mind was flipping in every direction. I didn't remember exactly what happened in the books, I had read them only once, lives before. I knew only a few details here and there, like that Annabeth, in the end, banged Percy, and that there was also a roman camp.

I also considered that the rain, while maybe useful in masking our scents, also reduced the natural illumination, cutting our sight shorter than I would have liked it. Everything was almost in shades of gray.

*Is it weird knowing that the seven years old girl will end up together with another seven years old kid?* I wondered distractedly.

I shrugged in the safe boundaries of my mind. It wasn't the strangest shit I had ever ended up in. The heavy rain had turned the uneven road into a slippery slide towards hell, so I hardly ever surpassed the 50 km/h. It was faster than we could run, so it was still a gain. We had no problems for the first half an hour of travel.

Then I heard the first thud: "Fuck you!" And the flash of lightning, followed by a low 'boom' almost like a shy thunder.

I lowered the window on my left and shouted out into the rain: "Language! There's a child on board!"

"I'm not a child." Annabeth hissed, but I heard a startled laugh over the surrounding chaos. Honestly? I was fucking scared.

"I meant Grover; he forgot to pee before we left and asked me to stop the car." I soothed the outraged seven years old. The satyr tried to put up a defense, but Annabeth was implacable: "But we can't stop!" she gasped, staring at Grover with wide, unbelieving eyes.

"Turn right!" The satyr in question shouted, hoping to avoid being the focus of a scared kid who needed an outlet. I turned the wheel, following orders: "That's what I told him, but he was whining. Hence, he's like a child." I explained.

Another flash of lightning lighted up our surroundings for a second: "Yeah! I'll deep fry your asses!" an acute voice exclaimed.

The clang of metal against metal, and an unhuman grunt later, Luke retorted: "Asses is a bad word, Thalia!"

The fact that I could hear him over the rain and the sound of the engine made clear that he was making an effort to be heard. At that moment, I realized that the two demigods were likely just as scared as me and were reacting in the same way as me. Honestly? It was exhilarating. I frowned, recognizing the alien excitement in my chest. It was like a part of me enjoyed fighting for my life. *I think I just found another reason why demigods tend not to get old.*

"Turn left here." Groover bleated.

I cursed, slowing down in the most steady way possible, acutely aware of the two demigods standing on the loading floor of the pickup. "Next time, warn me 200 meters before the turn." I grumbled, "Not on the crossroad."

"No matter, we need to finish on foot." He answered vindictively. I rolled my eyes.

"Hop down; we need to run! Grover, take Annabeth!" I shouted out of the window.

I noticed a shadow quickly approaching and slammed open the door on my left, kicking it with both my feet. I hit the shadow, that retreated under the rain only to try again once I had left the vehicle. I didn't think. The rain keeping me strangely awake, I twirled on myself, letting the shadow graze me. As soon as it surpassed me, I slammed closed the pickup's door, enjoying the sid crunch of something that broke under the door's momentum.

I took out my bowie, and distractedly, I realized that I was cackling madly. I was alive; I was alive; I was alive. Another flash of lightning, and the darkness around us, previously only cut by the pickup's headlights, disappeared, I could see only white.

"Aaargh!" I screamed, "Fuck you, Sparky! I can't see shit now!" Thalia was laughing, drunk on power, and on the same adrenaline that was keeping me alive. I heard a series of raindrops hitting something higher than me, behind. Once again, I didn't think. I rolled forward, wincing when the impact against the ground made the air escape my lungs. I need to practice this. I distractedly noticed. Then I felt a razor-thin burn across my back. I grunted in pain, too busy trying to understand where the fuck I was supposed to go if I couldn't see shit.

"This way!" I heard Groover exclaim.

I started to walk in that direction when a hand closed on my arm. I twirled the bowie in my hand and began to jab in the direction of my new offender when he spoke: "It's me!"

"Luke, Thalia blinded me!" I whined.

"So I heard." I put on my trusty sunglasses and started to blink quickly, eager to gain back my sight. Luke handed me something. I let him guide me for a few running steps before I managed to distinguish shapes again.

"Why are you giving me my shovel?" I asked as soon as I recognized it.

"Because dealing with dogs is easier with a long weapon, c'mon, Thalia bought us time, let's not waste it." was his clipped answer. We ran ahead, swirling through the trees and quickly catching up with the rest of our lame A-team.

"Why the fuck do we have Dobermanns on our heels?" I asked quickly, my knife returned to his sheath on my belt, and the shovel held like a battle-ax.

"Hellhounds, don't you see they have red eyes?" Annabeth corrected me. I would have been offended by her dismissive tone, but considering that she was being carried like a football ball under the armpit of a running satyr, I choose to let go. Maybe. I whirled, slamming the edge of the shovel on the Doberman that dared to come too close.

"Well, aren't you smart? You already figured out that people do love to be corrected by bratlings." I retorted with an enthusiastic tone.

Thalia, however, was soon lagging, the lightning storm of before had taken a lot out of her, and there she was, magic spear and shield out and shiny. I sighed, dropping my shovel: "Hop on." I ordered, she made to object, but I cut her off: "Trust in Luke to keep us safe, I'm warping the Mist around us as I speak, they won't see us."

And I wasn't lying: The almost invisible dust particles suspended under the rain gave way to the Mist, that I churned and spun tightly around us.

It was a single layer, but it was covering five fucking people. So I wasn't going to berate myself. All the adrenaline we had running through our bodies was somewhat... wasted. Soon enough, we crossed an invisible boundary; it was very similar to the difference I had felt when I left the forest I was born into, a year and a half before. The angst and stressful run had an underwhelming conclusion.

But I felt it in my bones, the rain stopped, and the sky ceased its incessant rumble. I even felt the clouds part, letting the sunshine hit the girl I was carrying on my back. I glanced over my shoulder and almost snorted: she had fallen asleep.

"We made it." wheezed Grover.

We must've been on the north shore of Long Island, and paradoxically, we were at the beginning of a valley that marched up to the ocean, which churned unhappily about a mile in the distance. Between here and there, I could hardly process everything I was seeing. The landscape was dotted with buildings that looked like they belonged to ancient Greek architecture: an open-air pavilion, an amphitheater, a circular arena...

Only that they all looked brand new, with white marble columns sparkling in the sun, I expected it, but seeing it was for real somewhat sealed the fact that I had ended up in yet another fictional world.

An hour later, the cut across my back had been stitched, Thalia had recovered enough to stand on her own two feet, and our surprisingly successful A-team was standing before who I supposed they were Dionysus and Chiron.

The man facing us was small but porky. He had a red nose, big watery eyes, and curly hair so black it was almost purple. He looked almost like a cherub—a cherub who'd turned middle-aged in a trailer park. The centaur had been lying on the ground, playing cards distractedly with the god. Chiron looked us with a spark in his eyes, which dimmed a bit when it crossed Grover's gaze, before tilting his head questioningly towards Dionysus.

"I am Chiron." the centaur introduced himself, "And he is Dionysus, but, since names are important, he will be referred to as Mr. D."



The alcoholic in withdrawal looked us once over 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 any of you, half-bloods."

"We are of one mind, then." I cheerfully quipped, happily noticing the look of dismay on Grover's face and the poorly disguised grin of Chiron's face.

"You already know what you are and why you are here then. Good, now you can scram." The pudgy little man grumbled.

"But then, why are you here?" Annabeth asked with a frown.

Chiron winked at her. "Mr. D offended his father a while back, took a fancy to a wood nymph who had been declared off-limits."

"A wood nymph," Luke repeated.

"Yes," Mr. D confessed. "Father loves to punish me. The first time, Prohibition. Ghastly! Horrid ten years! The second time-well, she 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. Unfair."

"I agree." I nodded.

Noticing the questioning looks I've been thrown, and the raised eyebrow from the god who turned people into dolphins for shit and giggles, I hastily explained: "Only because you say it's illegal to breathe, it doesn't mean anyone is going to obey. Only because you declare illegal falling, gravity doesn't stop acting. That's what Zeus did with declaring a nymph off-limits for Dionysus."

The sky rumbled, a single grey cloud hovering over us. "And taking away alcohol would be horrible to the average 30years old, taking wine away from him is the equivalent to taking away water from a fish. Only, he's immortal, and so he suffers instead of dying."

"Did you just compare me to a fish, Igor?" the drunk in withdrawal asked with a flat tone.

"A very cool one," I answered without thinking about it. "Sir," I added as an afterthought.

"I'll show them around." Chiron said, his tone implying clearly 'before Icarus get himself killed.' "Follow, children." He quietly ordered, and we were just a bit too tired to whine about it, so we followed. 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 us the camp grew an excellent crop for export to New York restaurants and Mount Olympus. "It

pays our expenses," he explained. "And the strawberries take almost no effort, Mr. D has this effect on fruit-bearing plants: they just go crazy when he was around."

"Granted, it works best with wine grapes, but Mr. D is restricted from growing those, so we make do with strawberries instead.

"So..." I started when the silence stretched for more than ten seconds: "You said your name was Chiron. Are you..."

He smiled down at me. "The Chiron from the stories? Trainer of Hercules and all that? Yes, Icarus, I am."

"Didn't you die taking Prometheus place? I'm pretty sure you are a constellation." I objected.

Chiron paused as if the question intrigued him. "I honestly don't know. I 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."

"And you were taught both by Artemis and Apollo, is that right?" I asked again.

The centaur nodded, raising an eyebrow at my surprising knowledge of mythology. "Any chances you're willing to teach healing?" I questioned.

"Why healing?" Thalia asked tiredly, likely bored from the adrenaline-inducing trip. "Because not knowing how to heal yourself is dumb as fuck that's why," I explained.

"Language." Luke admonished me.

"No, it's fine." Annabeth jumped in my defense: "Grover isn't here." she wisely explained.

My lips twitched upwards, and I saw Thalia turning away to hide a smile. While Luke nodded sagely, keeping up the running joke: "You're right, Annabeth, how silly of me."

Chiron watched our exchange with a faint smile, likely catching up on the inside joke, before answering my original question: "I usually teach to Apollo's children, since they are the more attuned to it, but I don't see why you shouldn't be able to join." I nodded my thanks, and the tour continued. We saw a warehouse-like building, where the weapons and armors were kept, the archery range, the canoeing lake (which in my head sounded stupid, there was the ocean less than a mile from the beginning of the valley), the stables (which Chiron didn't seem to like very much), the javelin range, the sing-along amphitheater, and the arena.

In the end, he showed us the cabins. There were twelve of them, nestled in the woods by the lake, arranged in a U. Two at the base and five in a row on either side. 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 nothing alike. Number nine had smokestacks, like a tiny factory. Number four had tomato vines on the walls and a roof made out of real grass. Seven seemed to be made of solid gold, which gleamed so much in the sunlight it was almost impossible to look at. 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.

In the center of the field was a huge stone-lined firepit. Since the rain had stopped, the temperature had risen again, so it was a hot day. Even so, the hearth smoldered. A girl about nine years old was tending the flames, poking the coals with a stick. I stilled, poking cautiously at the Mist, which was almost carefully flowing around her.

It wasn't something that happened naturally. The Mist was inert, it instinctively hid the 'supernatural,' I could recognize when it was warped in some strange way, sure sign of an illusion of some kind, but I never saw it behave in that way. *Well, almost never... Fucking hell, another goddess.* Then, it clicked the knowledge of mythology of every kind coming at my rescue: Hestia.

I quickened my steps, reaching again the group that almost left me behind. I looked around, 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 massive 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. I stopped for just a moment in front of the first cabin on the left: cabin three wasn't high and mighty like cabin one, but long, 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.

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. Inside I could see a bunch of girls and boys arm wrestling and arguing with each other while metal music blared.

"So, I get why Artemis and Hera' houses are empty, but why number one and three look brand new?" I asked, already knowing the answers.

"Demigods born from either the master of the sky, the sea, or the underworld are powerful, more powerful than it's prudent." Chiron started, his voice keeping the calm and yet incisive tone that made him such an effective teacher. "So, after WWII, they agreed to no longer sire children among humans."

I coughed, masking a laugh at the scrunched face Thalia was making: "Well, you aged well, you don't look a year over thirty-five." I joked at her.

There, Chiron stopped, looking questioningly at the girl, who, with a roll of her eyes, raised her hand, white-hot sparks and small bolts of lightning running among her fingertips. The centaur sighed slowly.

"Until your father claims you as his, we'll treat you as undetermined." And that was all that there was to be said on the topic. The afternoon was spent aimlessly roaming, and soon enough, we were all called for dinner. There were maybe a hundred campers, a few dozen satyrs, and a dozen assorted wood nymphs and naiads. 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 table, covered in white cloth trimmed in purple. Four of the tables were empty, Hera, Poseidon, Zeus, Artemis. But cabin eleven's was way overcrowded. I had to squeeze on to the edge of a bench with half my butt hanging off.

Finally, Chiron pounded his hoof against the marble floor of the pavilion, and everybody fell silent. He raised a glass. "To the gods!"

Everybody but me raised their glasses. "To the gods!"

Wood nymphs came forward with platters of food: grapes, apples, strawberries, cheese, fresh bread, and barbecue. My glass was empty, but spying the kids around, I saw them asking the glass what they wanted. "Iced water," I said, and like magic, the glass-filled itself. Once more, I realized that manipulating the Mist was only scratching the surface of what magic could do. I thought about Circe, and while turning men into pigs wasn't, exactly my dream, maybe I could learn how to do a Harry Potter worthy Transfiguration.

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. Exchanging a raised eyebrow with the strange companions of my recent adventure, I rose too. As I got closer, I saw that everyone was taking a portion of their meal and dropping it into the fire, the ripest strawberry, the juiciest slice of beef, the warmest, most buttery roll. I couldn't help wondering why an immortal, all-powerful being would like the smell of burning food. I wished I knew what god's name to say, but after a second spent wondering about my goals, I tossed a quarter of my food into the fire, whispering 'Hecate,' under my breath. And tilting my head respectfully towards the flame, I threw a slice of meat: "Apollo." I wanted to learn magic medicine, after all.

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. Our activities director, Chiron, says the next capture the flag is Friday. Cabin five presently holds the laurels."

A bunch of enthusiastic cheering rose from the Ares table. *Good for them.* I thought.

"Personally," Mr. D continued, "I couldn't care less, but congratulations. Also, I should tell you that we have several new campers today. Tully Brake, Annie Phase, Duke Jellal, and Igor." Chiron shook his head, and stomped his hoof once again: "Thalia Grace, Annabeth Chase, Luke Castellan, and Icarus." he corrected, visibly containing an eye-roll.

Dionysus nodded like he didn't say our names wrong on purpose: "That's right. Hurrah, and all that. Now run along to your silly campfire. Go on."

Everybody cheered. We all headed down toward the amphitheater, where Apollo's cabin led a sing-along. I heard camp songs about the gods been sung and jokes being thrown around, and the funny thing was, there was a part of my mind that felt almost... like it was being soothed, like I only had to let go to feel at home. Recognizing the effect of something trying to affect my mind, I willed myself through it, shredding the subtle magic.

I narrowed my eyes and looked around, finding Hestia by the fire, her welcoming eyes looking at me... sadly?

I sighed and rose from my place. *How many times will I be able to chat with a God who is not a complete jackass without being interrupted?* I walked towards her, the roaring fire felt warm and welcoming instead of scalding and thirst inducing. I plopped down on the side of the goddess. "So..." I started, "How's godhood treating you?"

She raised her eyebrows, a faint smile marrying her face: "How's magic treating you?" I tilted my head questioningly in her direction, but I could only see the mirth in her eyes. I wasn't exactly surprised that she knew, after all, I had just broken her light attempt at trapping me into a 'and they lived forever happily.'

I shrugged: "I would have preferred not having to abandon my home only because Minerva felt like butting in."

Hestia scrunched her nose in distaste: "Don't use our roman names." She quietly admonished me.

I raised an eyebrow at her; I remembered something from the books, but... "An acute case of schizophrenia, uh?"

She turned back to stare into the fire, a slight frown marring the face of the nine years old child: "Not many talk to me."

"Not many can keep up interesting conversations; you're not missing much." I retorted, not changing the target of my eyes. I could stare into the fire any day of the week, how often could I watch a goddess? Well, in this life of the mine, it could happen often, but it is still a new opportunity.

Her lips twitched almost mischievously: "This appearance of mine doesn't hide the answers to your questions."

"It's thanks to you that a hundred of demigods can stay together for long periods without killing each other. It's a beautiful power." I argued. "It helps that they are dragged here before they're able to form an independent idea of the world, and are often starved for their parents' attention." I continued. And frowning lightly, I examined my feelings of the day, in particular the strange exhilaration that I felt during the fight. "I bet that the divine part of us strives to become more, searching for challenges or the approval of those that are more... godly? Than us." I reasoned out loud.

Hestia turned towards me, the face of the nine years old a blank. Was she assessing the kind of threat to her family that I represented? She was the goddess of the hearth, after all. "Why there aren't homes for the other gods?" I asked, "Ignoring Hypno, Morpheus, Iris, you..." my smile assumed a mocking tilt: "Not very family-friendly, is it?"

"It's not, but sometimes one has to give, in order to be given, instead of taking only to keep taking." She minutely shook her head.

"How is Gandhi's philosophy serving you?" I asked, genuinely curious.

She gestured around us, I looked, seeing the hundred or so of kids mingling and laughing. I also noticed that the oldest among them looked twenty. "You tell me." I heard. And when I turned to look at her, she was gone.

Suddenly, the fire became silent, its light dimming. Lights danced down from the sky like Northern Lights, and out of nowhere, a grayish column developed over Annabeth's head, a silvery owl idly watching down on us, it then turned into a spear.

Chiron walked into the crowd, tilting his head respectfully towards the hologram. "All hail Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena Pallas, Gray Eyes and Goddess of Council!"

Everyone was quick to climb to their feet and bowed lightly towards the newly claimed demigoddess, while her half brothers and sisters quickly circled her. I remained laying down in the place I had been sharing with Hestia, feeling the warmth of the hearth closing on me like a cocoon, likely shielding me from the sight of the gods. I added my spin to it, effortlessly warping the Mist around my body to hide from the mortals.

A bronze-brown light shone upon Luke, who grimaced, a caduceus slowly spinning over his head: "All hail Luke Castellan, son of Hermes Of the Market-Place, Of Crafts, Of Wiles, Of Road-Intersections, Of the Games, Keeper of the Flocks, Ram-Bearer, Translator, patron of travelers and thieves!"

Finally, a pure white light danced upon Thalia, a lightning bolt turning into a majestic eagle. Chiron knelt, and so did everyone else: "All hail Thalia Grace, daughter of Zeus Of Pledges and Promises, King of the Gods, King of all Greeks, Bearer of the Aegis."

The northern Lights retreated into the sky, and I mentally thanked Hestia. I wasn't big on kneeling. Half an hour later, the sparks from the campfire were curling into a starry sky, and conch horn blew again, we all filed back to our cabins.

Cabin 11 was overcrowded, a lot crowded, I collapsed on my borrowed sleeping bag, sharing a smirk with Luke, who had instead received a proper bed, being a Royal Bastard and all. The chat with Hestia had been interesting, and I fell asleep looking forward to seeing if my belongings were still on my abandoned pickup. *The first task for tomorrow: find a way to build me a house or even a room somewhere in the woods.*

I heard a fart and stupid, childish giggling.

A private sleeping arrangement was a must, or cabin 11 would quickly turn from being an overcrowded dormitory to a cemetery.

### **Chapter 3: I Want a Jukebox**

**Thanks to Megapede for the beta-work!**

#### **I WANT A JUKEBOX**

During 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. But, having been raised by a fucking witch, I didn't have room to complain.

The crack of dawn on my first day at half-blood hill saw me sneaking out of cabin 11, and I made my way down to the Pavilion, glancing distractedly at the always smoldering heart in the middle of the common courtyard. Hestia was nowhere to be seen.

Pity, I liked chatting with her.

The camp was shrouded in the morning fog, but I didn't mind the cool, nebulized water that awoke me completely.

The food was already on the tables, and the bathtub-wide brazier wasn't lit. So sacrifices only at dinner?

I sat down, filling my plate, and chugging orange juice.

A thump made me raise my eyes: Thalia had settled down in front of me, her hair a complete mess, and her face clearly expressing how much she loathed being awake. I smirked.

"Well. Hello, princess." I hailed the daughter of Zeus.

She grimaced a bit, vaguely pointing at me with a knife, before filling her plate.

"Too early for bantering, I take it?"

She grunted. Okay.

"Invite me to live in your cabin, and I'll gift you the shirt of the AC/DC you were wearing yesterday." I offered, hoping to exploit her still half-asleep state.

She froze, half stick of bacon dangling from her mouth. She chewed, swallowed, proceeded to ask for water in her glass, and washed her face with it.

The change was immediate, half-lidded, tired eyes left space to twin orbs glowing cobalt blue, her vaguely suffering face turned into a smug one.

"I want all of your rock-band t-shirts." she counter-offered.

"Two."

"Half." she narrowed her eyes.

"Five."

"I want ten, and I get to pick." her smile was showing too many teeth to make me comfortable.

"Six, so with the AC/DC one, you get a shirt for each day of the week. Final offer." I offered her my hand to shake.

She accepted. Yahoo!

"She tricked you." Luke sat down at my right, a mischievous smile on his face.

"Yesterday you weren't listening, you can't sleep in a cabin that's not yours." He popped my bubble.

Shit.

"I still needed a place where I could leave the stuff on the pickup. Have you seen the others in cabin 11? It's like Juvie." Not that I ever lived in one.

I chose to see the glass half-full "It may not happen to you, being a Royal Bastard and all, but being a Regular Bastard, I had to tie my shoes to my calves to make sure they wouldn't be mysteriously gone during the night."



While each morning, Luke, Annabeth, and Thalia took Ancient Greek from a smug-looking 14 years old son of Athena, they were about the gods and goddesses in ancient greek. I clearly knew my shit, and thusly refused to attend, I spent my time running through the woods, weaving under branches and loosing against nymphs. The little bitches knew how to run, that's for sure. I didn't train only my body, getting used to manipulating the mist around me while in movement instead.

Invisibility for me, for that branch, twisting the Mist so that it would copy something that wasn't there... basically high-grade illusions.

The rest of the day rotated through outdoor activities.

I did not piss at archery either, in my book, staying away from the enemy and swarming him with arrows was a great plan, so I often trained with the Apollo kids. While I didn't have any exceptional talent for it, I could learn. I was also hoping to get an in with Chiron's healing lessons. The centaur had forgotten to tell me that before teaching me anything magic-healing related, I had to memorize something like two thousand herbs, fungi, and random venoms from dusty old books. Apollo kids had it easy, they were naturally attuned to healing, and as such, they instinctively knew which plants to use.

I ignored canoeing; it seemed a stupid thing to learn. However, swimming was another kettle of fish entirely. For all my traveling, I had never entered a natural body of water. It was different.

I could feel some kind of... alive, alive, alive vibe from the water. There was a power in it, something...

It felt alive in the same way the forest I grew up in had felt when I stretched my metaphysical fingers towards that power, it slipped through, and I was left trying to grab water. It's worthy of further investigation.

My straight-combat training began after the first week when I first made my way into the sandy arena. Luke and Thalia were attending their ancient greek lessons, so I was alone.

I browsed the training weapons, selecting a couple of daggers, a sword that felt more like a mace than anything else, and a wooden spear without tip. I placed myself in a dismissed portion of the arena and got started with the sword.

Slash from up to bottom. Ha, the sword going from vertical to perfectly parallel to the ground.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Forcing muscles to learn a routine was boring shit.

"Look, fresh meat." A voice directed to me interrupted my self-imposed torture. A sixteen years old son of Ares was marching towards me, a couple of goons on each side. They all wore armors, complete with helmets, and they were holding a shield on their left arm, a big-ass bronze shield, if it weighed less than 15kg, I was a wood nymph.

"He's using our space, James." Goon number one said.

I sighed tiredly. Ah, dick-measuring contest. I'm surprised it took that long.

Nobody wanted to piss off Thalia, with her being the daughter of the big bad boss and all that, while Annabeth was 7, and thus beneath notice. Luke was the son of Hermes, meaning that the bosses of cabin 11 kept out an eye for him. That left me as 'the new kid' to bully around.

"Well, if he gives me those sunglasses of his, I might even not maim him." Goon two added.

I tilted my head, watching alternatively between my blunted sword and the helmets sitting on the heads of the five idiots.

I took a deep breath and shaped the Mist. It clung on me like a second skin, mimicking the movement of my chest with each breath.

I stepped sideways, invisible, leaving behind an Icarus shaped illusion paralyzed by fear.

"Look at him; he can't even move." Goon number five sneered and walked forward to my hologram.

I steadied myself, rolling my shoulders to make sure they weren't stiff and swung the sword like a baseball mace, the flat of the blade crashing on the side of the head of the Goon number one.

The wannabe bullies froze for a second, immediately bringing out their weapons and looking at my hologram warily. It didn't help that my illusion had sprouted a mocking smirk on his own.

Another thing I need to understand properly. I frowned lightly; sometimes, my illusions became more real than I pictured them to be.

I stalked forward until I was behind the group: with two precise swings, another two sons of Ares went down.

The hologram of me unraveled, leaving the last two wannabe bullies to fight back to back against an enemy that didn't register on their senses. I chose to work on my psychological warfare skills.

"Eeny, meeny, miny, moe

Catch a bully by the toe

If it squeals cut it off,

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe." I singsonged, my voice echoing around them.

I choose to leave James (who I believed was the boss of the Ares cabin) last. I could use an instructor after all.

Still invisible, I stomped as hard as I could my heel on the goon's toe, likely breaking it (seriously, who wears sandals when going to fight?).

When he bent down to try and grab me, I slammed the hilt on my sword against his nose, breaking it and sending him in the realm of unconsciousness.

I jumped back, unraveling the Mist around me and smiling cheerfully at James, who had whirled on me, his eyes warily darting around.

"Relax, I'm real, and I won't maim you." I started, taking off my sunglasses and attaching them on the hem of my shirt. "I can try to teach you how to see instead of looking." I offered.

The son of Ares was tall and bulky, and admittedly he made for a scary figure. He kept his shield raised, wisely not trusting my words: "Why would you do it?"

"You are the counselor of the Ares kids, meaning that you're the best in a straight fight, is that true?"

When he nodded, I continued: "Hermes is the god of trade, is he not? As a member of cabin 11, I offer a trade. In exchange for my efforts, you'll do your best to teach me, hand to hand, daggers, sword, shield, and spear. The complete combat-pack."

He was interested, only a fool wouldn't be, but he was also unsure if I could be trusted. "And I even promise not to teach it to Athena's kids." I sweetened the deal. If there was something I could count on, it was the rivalry between Ares and Athena. After all, the first was the god of war; the second was the goddess of strategy and battle. He agreed.

During the following months, I found out two things: one, all Ares kids were healthy in all the shit that regarded combat, hand to hand, sword, spear, dagger. You name it.

And two, James Johnson was a slave driver, and he wasn't as dumb as a rock, which was uncanny, because if I was sure of something, was that the rest of his brothers and sisters shared that sad characteristic. But again, the war was stupid business, so it made sense.

I liked the sword, even if it was boring, and having Luke trash me with it anytime he wished was annoying. The same applied for the spear and Thalia, she just understood it in a way that I couldn't emulate.

In comparison to the spear and shield, daggers were easy, I simply moved my body, knowing that I held something very small and very lethal at the end of my arms.

My hands lacked the powerful grip necessary to be effective in hand to hand combat properly, but it was mostly due to my age than anything else.

I didn't have Hephaestus's skill with metalwork, even if I made myself useful at the forge, slowly picking up the differences between celestial bronze and steel. Basically? Only its magical monster-killer properties. The mind-boggling-ness of the forges was outstanding.

Living at the half-blood camp was, at times, exhilarating and, at times depressingly boring, but always tiring. Which was something I appreciated, signifying that I was learning loads?

Despite all that, I liked the camp. I got used to the morning fog over the beach, even if I steered clear of the ocean, remembering clearly how, at the end of the Iliad, a couple of giant sea-serpents had eaten someone. I got used to 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 avoid dumbass activities as best as I could.

Everyone was always looking at Thalia like she was about to eat their souls. Oh, everyone was kowtowing her, sure, even Annabeth, impressionable mortal child that she was, started sitting a bit straighter when Thalia was around. Luke was the only one who treated her with a semblance of normality. Well, I did that too, but it was more because of my natural talent towards disrespect.

### 19-August 1999

I walked through the woods near the border of the Half-blood camp until I reached the clearing and looked over our carefully selected team. Thalia and Luke were in, of course, David Taylor, a bulky and short fifteen years old son of Hephestus, and Jim Hunter, a very tall sixteen years old son of Hermes.

"Mr. D will skin us alive." Jim was objecting.

"Then you don't know him at all." I cut him off, walking in the clearing.

"Meaning that you do, instead?" Thalia retorted.

"Well, he is your brother, so maybe you know better," Luke smirked.

"Please, don't remind me." She grumbled.

"I'll be calling your father Big D, Thalia, since Mr. D is his son and whatnot." I brought them up to speed with the codename I had chosen for the King of the gods.

"And because of that time when Thalia called him Big Dickhead" Luke clarified, making Thalia blush and bringing us to snicker.

I crouched on the ground: "Okay, okay, short version: Big D seduced and impregnated the beautiful princess of Thebes, Semele, but Big D's wife tricked Semele into demanding that Thalia's pops reveal his true form to her. As a mortal, Semele could not look upon a god's true form without dying. Big D managed to rescue the unborn demigod by sewing him into his thigh. After his birth, he was taken to Silenus."

"Wait, the old satyr? He's senile!" David interrupted.

"It was a shitload of years ago, dumbass." Jim quickly cut him off.

I rolled my eyes: "Once grown, he learned to cultivate grapes and became the first to turn them into wine. He then wandered across Asia, teaching mortals the secrets of winemaking. After his extended vacation, Mr. D ascended Mount Olympus and became the last-arriving of the twelve Olympians.

Since he was the only demigod ever to become an Olympian, because he was raised on the mythical Mount Nysa (which was believed to be either far to the south or the east), and because he wandered Asia before arriving in Greece, he was seen as an outsider. This has always been an inherent part of his cult, which often focused on the more subversive elements of his nature. Mr. D was often called Eleutherios, meaning "the liberator," because his wine, music, and ecstatic dance freed his followers from self-consciousness and the restraints of society. He is the one who constantly crossed the boundary between the civilized and uncivilized and the known and unknown. He is a god of chaos and the protector of misfits."

I finished reporting the tale, seeing that the two Hermes kids we had added to our team were sold.

"Gods, you're such a nerd." Thalia frowned, unleashing laughter.

I pouted, rising from the ground: "Well, everyone knows what to do, Thalia, go play pinochle with Chiron and Mr. D, try to pull an all-nighter, we'll smuggle shit back in just before the crack of dawn."

"I'm the only one who doesn't like the idea of using cabin one as a warehouse for stolen stuff?" David grumbled.

"Hey, I live there and don't have a problem with it, so it's okay," Thalia reassured him.

"Besides, he may be the god of Rightful Law and whatnot, but if he obsessively obeyed it, Sparky would not be here." Luke poked at her sides, causing her to zap him as a retort.

"Why does it have to be me to act as a decoy?" She whined again.

"Because you're so powerful, you'll attract every monster on the east coast," Jim flippantly answered.

"Because Mr. D is your brother?" Luke hopefully added.

"Because you're the strongest and as such, you need to sacrifice yourself for the good of the mission." I nodded sagely.

"You make it sounds like she's going to seduce Mr. D..." David grumbled.

While Thalia was looking at us with a mixture of loathing and disgust, I stage whispered: "Fun-team, let's go!" and set off in the dark. We all had dinner before, so it had been easy sliding away from the crowd in the shared courtyard.

We reached my loyal pickup without problems; I took the driver seat, Luke and Jim took the loading floor while David sat beside me, lowering the rear window so that we would be able to talk with the other two demigods.

"I still dislike that a 13 years old kid is our driver." the son of Hephaestus said.

"Tough luck, I've been driving longer than anyone else." I defended my position for the four-hundredth time, "And the pickup is mine."

"That only means that you stole it first." He raised an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged, unrepentant: "We'll need to sacrifice part of the loot to Hermes, just to keep him on our good side for the next time."

"That's why we're taking as much shit as we can." Jim soothed us.

I laughed at that. I was reborn in a world where gods were real, and I dragged a bunch of teens into a stealing-expedition into the mundane world.

"Please leave the payment part to me, ok? Don't try and do shit with the Mist." I reminded them.

"You worry too much, RB." Luke soothed me, "We remember, we are on a timer, lots of places to visit."

"RB?" David questioned.

"Regular Bastard, unlike the rest of you, who have been recognized by your divine parent, and as such are Royal Bastards," I explained with a snort.

David frowned a bit: "RB can go for both the titles."

"That's kind of the point, dude." Jim quipped in.

And with that mindless chatter, we had reached the first Supermarket of our list.

For eight hours straight, we followed a precise plan, ticking off items from our shopping list. Boxes of wine, beer, rum, tequila... all kinds of alcohol made its way on the loading floor of the pickup.

Changing malls, we managed to get our hands on an awe-inspiring set of fireworks, even if David rumbled something unintelligible. As a Hephaestus kid, he likely wanted to build them on his own, only because he could.

The 'payment' consisted of me giving the mortal responsible blank pieces of paper along with a bucketload of Mist on his face. There was no need for cloak and dagger with the barest control over the Mist.

Pulling an all-nighter would have tired us, but Ambrosia was better than cocaine, and with fewer side effects too. Well, unless you were talking about overdose, in which case it turned lethal.

The other members of the team had been embarrassed at one of my stops, but I wasn't going to ignore it. I entered a pharmacy and left with no less than 400 rubbers, mark Durex, because I knew some shit was going to happen on the big-ass afterparty planned on the 31st August. Once Dionysus and Chiron were done chewing us out, we could at least point out that we had been responsible.

I didn't care shit if the kids were underage, demigods were naturally sturdier than average, and their livers could survive some drinking. The same reasoning went for sex.

The afterparty was going to be open to 12 years old or older since that was the lower age someone had when sent on a quest (but mostly because Thalia was 12). If Chiron deemed 12 years old responsible enough to risk their lives, then there was nothing forbidding them to have drunk and unsatisfying sex.

The counselors of the cabins were going to keep an eye on the younger ones; at least, I hoped so. The only ones to know something about this were Thalia, Luke, Jim, David, and me. We planned to let in on the plan the counselors of Dionysus, Hermes, and Apollo. After all, being presented with all the necessary for a more teen-friendly party would deceive them into helping us.

Finding people stealing-friendly outside of Hermes' cabin without giving up the game had been difficult enough, no need to risk it before it was necessary. Luckily, several demigods felt that the less they cared about mortals, the more they would result important to their divine parent.

It wasn't a coincidence that bar Luke, the others were orphans (of their mortal parent at not to attract attention to our tired state; I couldn't care less.

"Tyche, bless us in our endeavors, and I'll find something cool to sacrifice to you." I prayed with a greedy smile on my face once we reached the boundary with the Half-Blood camp.

"Who's that?" Luke asked.

"Our sister." Jim clarified.

"Daughter of Hermes and Aphrodite," David grumbled, adding something not very complimentary of unloyal wives., making the rest of us roll our eyes.

We sneaked through the fog, the dawn giving us enough light to reach cabin 1, where Thalia was waiting. We needed three trips from the pickup to the cabin, the daughter of Zeus busy taking in the stuff we had unceremoniously abandoned on her doorstep.

Each of us spent the rest of the day sleeping whenever we could, doing the bare minimum not to attract attention to our tired state. I knew that I waited the whole time for the other shoe to drop.

It didn't; Lupin III would have been proud and Diabolik as well.

That evening I once again found myself around the giant roaring fire in the shared courtyard.

I was laid on the ground near the fire, hoping that Hestia would take pity on me and come out to chat, when Thalia dropped at my side: "I want a jukebox."

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"I have your entire vinyl stash and no way to listen to it." She explained.

"You do realize that it means granting me access to your cabin anytime I want, yes?" I narrowed my eyes. Like hell, I was going to let her enjoy my music without reaping the benefits.

"I'm already hiding a vast amount of rubbers nobody warned me about." She retorted.

"Hey, those are the only responsible item we took." I justified them, "And the easiest to hide."



"Okay, you can come in whenever you want, deal?" Thalia surrendered.

"I'll see what I can do." I smiled greedily before raising from my position and looking for David.

I dragged the muscular short son of Hephestus where the others couldn't hear us: "If I get my hands on a jukebox, could you tinker with it to add different types of vinyl and maybe some big-ass speakers?"

His dark eyes brightened: "I never get to play with electric equipment as much as I'd like..."

## **Chapter 4: An offer you can refuse**

**I thank Megapede for the betaing!**

### **AN OFFER YOU CAN REFUSE**

01 September 1999

The first thing I felt was the unsufferable squawking of the seagulls. It echoed in my head, turning the uncomfortable sharpness of simply being aware of a painful ringing.

Fucking seagulls.

Beyond my closed eyelids, I felt the unforgiving light of an uncaring sun. I kept my eyes scrunched close, trying to postpone the inevitable.

In a sudden moment of clear thinking, I dragged my hand...

*Sand? Why there's sand under my fingers?*

...I dragged my hand over my chest, fumbling blindly until I found my sunglasses, resting on the hem of my shirt.

I spent the following minute placing them on my face. After that, consciously choosing to ignore my killer headache, I dusted off the sand from my hand before massaging the hate for being alive out of my still closed eyes.

In the meantime, under the irregular brain killing squawks of the hated birds, I recognized the regular crashing of the waves. *Sea?*

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes a fraction, gritting my teeth when the light proved itself far too harsh.

I worked on opening my eyes a while, and when I succeeded, I was met with the sight of an almost cloudless sky, a single, grey nimbus sitting still over me.

Unfortunately, it wasn't shielding me from the sun, which was cheerfully slamming into my fucking face.

With a groan, I forced myself into a seated position, disgusted by the taste in my mouth, and I looked confused at my own feet: I had only a single shoe left, my other bare feet had been drawn on with a permanent marker. I tilted my head, squinting my eyes: I had no idea as to what the fuck the drawing meant.

I moved my head, slowly taking in my surroundings.

I suddenly remembered I was a demigod in a magic half-mythological camp.

*Uh, strange the shit you can forget while drunk.* I was honestly surprised I had forgotten.

Focusing on understanding what I was seeing, I realized that the crumpled form on my left leg was Thalia, a permanent marker in her hand. Narrowing my eyes and postponing any plots of revenge, I idly scratched my chest, only for my fingers to entangle themselves with something.

I looked down, remembering that the previous evening everybody got their leather necklaces, I looked at the bead for my first summer, the design was pitch black, with a pure white lightning bolt shimmering in the centre, Thalia joining the camp had somehow overshadowed every other event. For some reason, there was a wine cork right beside the black bead.

There were a lot of completely knocked out demigods on the beach. I couldn't be bothered to count, but there were... at least more than twenty. *Fucking hell, my head.*

I tried to remember what exactly happened the previous night, only getting confusing, blurry flashes of memories bleeding one into another.

I pocketed Thalia's marker and held her while I slid my leg from beneath her head. I then somewhat managed to rise and stumble towards the sea. The beach was deceptively big, I had to walk for a couple of hundred meters before reaching it. And when the waves reached my feet, I noticed the unmistakable form of Dionysus at my side.

"Few have the balls to call upon me during a party of these dimensions." He spoke.

I grunted, it was too early to deal with a grumpy god. I reluctantly took off my sunglasses and washed my face with the following wave, immediately feeling a lot better. Once I had recovered a bit, I looked at the god: his usually red-rimmed eyes were bright, his purple irises shining madly in the morning sun.

"You don't look like an alcoholic in withdrawal." I accused him.

Dionysus simply raised an eyebrow, but I could see a grin threatening to break his bored facade. Then my eyes roamed over the beach, seeing that all the demigods who participated in the previous night's festivities were still out cold. I frowned, linking the dots.

Then I snorted: "You're welcome." Turns out that fifty demigods throwing a big-ass, alcohol-filled party gave quite the bolt to Dionysus.

"There are several rules regarding alcoholic beverages at the camp." A voice said.

I turned to see that Chiron was looking at me with a blank expression. I contained a shiver when the cold seawater licked my feet. It did its job of keeping me awake. I frowned: "For being an immortal that sends 12 years old on deadly quests, you're surprisingly uptight, has anyone ever told you so?"

"I did, for a matter of fact." Dionysus butted in.

"And you seem to believe this," I gestured vaguely to the still KO demigods "Is somehow my fault."

At their unimpressed stares (even if I believe Dionysus was enjoying it) "All the stuff came from cabin 1, if you need to toss someone out of the camp, it's Thalia."

The almost cloudless sky rumbled ominously. I waved mockingly at the clouds: "Truth is often uncomfortable."

Then I turned again towards the two immortals: "Good luck in tossing her out."

The following wave reached my calves, drenching completely my only remaining sock. Chiron dug into the wet sand with his hoof a couple of times before turning back and returning to the camp proper: "Mr. D is in charge of the Half-Blood camp, as such he is the one to dispense discipline."

Once he was gone, the short, plump and honestly baffling god spoke: "You seem to think I need proof to toss you out. Or that I need a reason to turn you into a dolphin. I don't."

He was unreadable, however, I highly doubted that his words would ever become something else than a vague threat: the camp existed mostly to 'train heroes' but they were to be kept out of Olympus politics. Otherwise, with every rivalry, the camp would be at war with itself, and gods couldn't just kill or do whatever to children of other gods. Manipulate demigods, sure, plan their demise, why not, but directly acting? Smoke and mirrors to freak out impressionable kids.

I shrugged: "The way I see it, either Zeus" the sky rumbled, its ruler not appreciating being called with his name, " calls you back because he thinks you're a bad influence, effectively cutting short your punishment, or he praises you because we strengthened our bonds of friendship and whatnot through a party, which falls under your domain."

The god snorted and leaned forward, his finger tapping the cork on my new necklace, doing something I would try to understand later. "And in any case, I sacrificed a good litre of tequila in your name, so for you, it's a win-win situation." I added.

"That's why I arranged for the younger kids to be busy in the forest." he grinned.

I grimaced at the thought of being awakened by an outraged 7 years old Annabeth. And for the first time, I bowed a little bit. That was something I could respect. "My sons could learn something from this..." Dionysus muttered.

"Why am I the only one awake?" I frowned, the other demigods weren't even stirring.

"Summoning me can have side effects when I grant my blessing on unprepared mortals." the god of ritual madness and wine stated.

I looked at him with a confused expression: "You speak like I am not one."

Dionysus rose an eyebrow 'You're awake, aren't you?' was the clear message.

*Oh, no, that shit isn't going to fly.* Acting uncharacteristically rashly, I fumbled, reaching into my back pocket and taking out a little switchblade. With a contained grimace, I nicked my left palm, letting the red, human, blood fill my cupped hand. I scrunched my nose, I had cut a bit too deeply.

"I am offended that you believed me a god." and I was, James had made me spit blood enough times during training, but I wanted to nip whatever strange idea Dionysus had in the bud.

I flicked my hand on the incoming wave, ridding myself from the pooled blood. "I didn't say you were a god, I implied you were something different from the common demigod." Dionysus clarified, his eyes following the drops of blood falling in the water.

Then, out of the blue, I felt something. Burning right below my stomach. *Churning. Heavy. Wet?* I fell on my knees, gasping for breath, my hands plunged in the sand under the seawater, the cut on my palm forgotten.

"One should be careful when offering blood to old Barnacle's beard. Even if in your case it seems to have done some good." The voice of the wine god was drowned by the crushing sound of the waves.

Only, the waves were in my head, echoing my heartbeat. I focused on the crushing feeling, I felt like I was being squashed from the inside. I breathed as slowly as I could, reaching inwards, trying to feel for what was wrong in the same way I tried to feel for magic outside.

The origin of it all... I went blindly into myself until I could feel a warm-cold-undefined centre of something. A heat-power-gravity-something that started flowing like warm-

cool water through my veins. It didn't hurt, it wasn't searing hot, it was just there. Like finding again a friend I had forgotten about, and yet different, like finding a new sense I never had before. In any case, I felt somewhat heavier. *No, scratch that, tougher... something...* There were no words that could properly describe it.

I looked angrily at the ocean before rising from my position, the god of wine had been staring unashamedly at me, as I made for some interesting pet, with the same attention one could dedicate to look at a fly grating its legs one against the other.

"I'm not his son, am I?" I whispered, and the sky thundered its outrage.

I whipped my head towards the clouds: "Oh, shut up! Thalia is your daughter and we're the same age!" I couldn't be bothered to deal with the Head Hypocrite at that moment.

"No, or we would have noticed it, believe me." Dionysus rolled his eyes "You're likely Barnacle's beard's nephew, the son of one of his bastards, no doubt. Offering your blood likely gave him the chance to recognize it."

"So my mother is a goddess, well that narrows it." I distractedly pointed out. I was busy watching my hands, in particular, the deep cut in my palm, that disappeared only to be replaced by a scar.

"What does this make me?" I wondered.

"Why would you think this changes you?" The diminutive god asked, genuinely not understanding what my point was.

"I'm 3/4 god, 1/4 human." I explained, "It is kind of a big deal for me."

Then I frowned: "It doesn't even make sense why I cut myself to prove you that I was human, I knew my blood was red."

Dionysus snorted: "Then you can recognize the hand of the Fates when it punches you. Good, it means I have chosen well."

"Chosen what?" I was suddenly very annoyed with the implications of his words.

He pointed at my neck, more exactly, to the cork added to my necklace that he had touched before. I could see a fucking thyrsus on it. Even if it was a cork barely a single inch tall, I could recognize every detail. It was a straight branch of giant fennel covered with ivy vines and leaves, topped with a pine cone and by a bunch of vine-leaves and grapes or ivy-leaves and berries.

I recalled quickly whatever I could remember about it: the thyrsus, associated with Dionysus and his followers, the Satyrs and Maenads, was a symbol of prosperity, fertility, hedonism, and pleasure. "I'm some kind of fucking priest now, fan-fuckin-

tastic." I groaned "Is this why you are being so forthcoming with me now? And not calling me Igor?"

"You called my name during the last night festivities. I gave my blessing." Dionysus smiled sharply, making me acutely aware that he wasn't human.

I frowned: "I don't remember calling upon anyone. And was this the only party that attracted your attention? Besides, it was a one-time thing, shouldn't I be able to refuse whatever this is meant to be?"

The diminutive god chuckled: "It was the only hyped-up party composed only by demigods." he then tilted his head, studying my expression: "Are you even aware of what it means to carry that symbol when it is given from me?"

I shrugged: "No, but I dislike being a slave of whatever kind and..."

"...and you won't be." He interrupted me. "My mark will simply enhance what you feel while in a... how do the young say it these days?... Oh yes, a big-ass party."

I crossed my arms, my fingers clenching around the cork: "I don't want to forget the parties I attend to. What would be the point?"

Dionysus snorted: "Then drink less, it was not I to turn your brain into mush, boy."

There was some kind of catch, I was sure: "What does it mean for me? And what do you gain from it?"

"I've never been one to make plans." He sighed contently, the breeze ruffling his curls, which were so dark that they had a purple shine to them. "Wearing that cork means very little to you, when you try to convince others to participate in big-ass parties you'll have my blessing to succeed, and I'll get a spark of that energy, nothing that you'll notice or need."

This sounds more and more like the Wabbajack from Skyrim... I realized.

"So, it will make better whatever party I land myself into? No side effects, no strings attached?" I raised an eyebrow, it was such a ...bizarre... yes that was the word, bizarre power to have.

"None" he cheerfully answered.

I still wasn't sold: "What if I don't wish to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh? Will you make a group of women believe I'm a feral beast and have them rip me apart?"

The god threw back his head and laughed, it was savage, cruel, uncaring: "As amusing as it sounds, I wouldn't, that is ancient history. I acted that way only because a mortal had the sheer gall to forbid someone to worship me. I don't take choices away from

others, I free them. It's one of the reasons I am an outsider in Olympus, the others don't appreciate my dislike for plans of whatever kind."

"Does this have anything to do with Fate and some kind of lame Prophecy?" I asked tiredly.

The god smiled.

"What if I choose to never have fun again? Just to spite you?" I tried.

He shrugged: "Then you're free to do so, the mark will naturally fade with time. I don't particularly care one way or another. I just felt it would be interesting."

"Is it tiring? Explaining shit?" it was exasperating on my end.

"As a god, it's in my nature to be mysterious and to speak in mumbo jumbo. And given the peculiar characteristics of my domain, it goes double for me."

"I'm guessing this chat is a one time deal?"

"I don't lie to those who wear my mark, and more in general, lies are against my nature, they're a product of the more controlling tiers of civilization." he, apparently honestly, answered.

"I don't know you well enough to blindly walk around with your mark hanging from my neck" It made me nervous, it sounded cool, but I only had his word to confirm it.

"Shall I introduce myself then?" he sardonically asked, and for a second I imagined him performing a musical like the Genie in Aladdin. I distractedly wondered if I was already going insane.

"My mother was the mortal Semele, daughter of the founder of Thebes. Zeus's jealous wife, Hera, wanted to know the identity of the child's father. She disguised herself as Semele's old nurse and went to see her. When my mother told her that Zeus was the father, Hera challenged her to prove her claim by having Zeus appear in all his glory. Semele did so. However, the power of the King of the Gods was too much for a human to bear. Semele was turned into ashes." I was surprised to hear an actual tone of... not sadness, but maybe regret?

"Before my mother died, Zeus pulled me out of her womb. Sewing me into his thigh until I was born, only to be left with my mother's sister Ino, who disguised me as a girl to protect me from Hera. As punishment for helping me, Hera drove Ino and her husband insane." I grimaced a bit, I hadn't known that part of the story.

"Yes, your little friend had it a lot easier." He nodded in Thalia's direction.

The god scoffed, before shaking his head: "Hera also drove me insane. Thereafter, I wandered the world accompanied by my teacher, Silenus, bands of satyrs, and my women followers."

"The maenads." I added, "The ones who enjoyed raw meat." I scrunched my nose, that kind of savagery wasn't part of my repertory.

The god nodded: "I always preferred women." he stage-whispered.

"When I reached Egypt, I introduced the cultivation of grapes and the art of winemaking. When I went to Libya, I established an oracle in the desert. I also journeyed to India, conquering all who opposed me. I brought laws, cities, and wine to the country. On my way back to Greece, I met my grandmother, the earth goddess Cybele. She cured me of the madness Hera inflicted me with, the same madness that destroyed my mother's sister, Ino, and her husband. Two mortals that dared protect their family against the queen of the gods." He stared at the waves for a while, and I was unsure as to what to do. Staying still for a couple of years probably would be like the blink of an eye for a god.

Just when I was about to speak, he continued his story: "My grandmother taught me the mysteries of life and resurrection, and after a while, I ended up ascending to my seat in Olympus."

He stopped staring at the ocean and turned towards me, his eyes shining of an eldritch purple fire: "I am both the symbol of creative forces, the lifeblood of nature, and the death that comes after the excess, the liberation of instincts buried too deep to be faced. I was the spark in the heart of the French revolution and the excess of the government of Terror."

He took a step towards me: "Remember this, Icarus. Of all the Olympians, I'm the only one who got to know mortality on his skin. I don't lie. I don't pretend that the council of the gods is anything more than over-glorified wanking. And I swear by the Styx that everything I told you today is pure, unadulterated truth."

A thunder boomed, rocking the sky.

And he was gone, a faint smell of red wine left behind.

Only then, my headache returned with a vengeance. I watched the unconscious form of Thalia. *Zeus swore on the Styx to not sire children again, and look at her...*

ANNABETH

12 September 1999



There was something wrong, I knew it. I trailed my fingers over the single, black bead on my leather necklace eyeing suspiciously the older campers.

*I still don't think Thalia's arrival is so special. I mean, I arrived with her and I'm a daughter of Athena. Luke is the son of Hermes, and in a few months, he proved himself to be the most talented swordsman in the last 300 years...* On the 31st of August something happened, I was sure of it. I stalked in the common courtyard, being careful to keep myself out of sight from his position.

He was sitting near the smouldering hearth, apparently talking to himself. And just when I was about to walk towards him and pretend some answers, I spotted a couple of older demigods stopping to talk with the sunglasses freak with mismatched eyes.

I moved closer, one of my older brothers had explained to me that every good plan was based on exact info on the problem that was to be faced. *It's so obvious.* I refrained from scoffing out loud, it would have given my position away.

Just when I was about to be in range, the two older campers walked away, after bowing lightly to him! That made no sense whatsoever. Since their arrival months before, Thalia had been treated with some wariness, Luke with rightly evergrowing respect for his abilities, and in less than a day, the freak had obtained the same, if not better, status.

And it irritated me greatly that when I had asked why to Luke or Thalia, they were so oblivious about it. But there was some kind of game afoot, I just knew it. When I had questioned one of the older couples they sniggered, sniggered! Like there was something funny about it.

A certain David from the Haephestus cabin had dared to laugh in my face.

I stomped towards him angrily, I was going to leave with my answers, or I would smash his unsufferable sunglasses in.

He tilted his head towards me when I stopped less than half a meter from him: "That's it! What's going on?"

"Whatever do you mean, Annabeth?" he asked, genuinely confused. *Or at least pretending to be.* I narrowed my eyes threateningly.

"Something happened at the end of the summer and everyone knows it and is not telling me!" I shouted, putting him in his place. He hummed, rightly considering that whatever secret he tried to keep had just been blown. I smirked in the safe confines of my head, *I got him.*

"What makes you think something happened?" He dared ask.

"Because everyone older than eleven is wearing a tin cap of beer on his necklace beside the bead of this year." I pointed out, and it was obvious to see.

He hummed again: "Only tin caps?"

I frowned, trying to recall: "Well, no, some had shards from glass bottles..."

"Maybe there's a pattern?" He seriously asked.

"Do not try to distract me with some idiocy, Icarus." I hissed.

He hunched over me: "Do you see any others with a cork?" he whispered.

I narrowed my eyes, looking suspiciously at it: "I'm the only one with it because I have to find out what the others necklaces mean..."

"What about all the people suddenly talking to you?" I asked. If he was trying to trick me...

He shrugged: "Sometimes they drop clues, but honestly?"

He waited for me to nod before going on: "They just poke fun at me most of the time..." he sounded a bit sad.

But he suddenly brightened, I thought, it was hard to tell with those sunglasses of his hiding his eyes: "You're pretty smart, aren't you?"

*Well, I wouldn't say that... Oh well, I know I am.* "I'm a daughter of Athena."

"Then can help me figure this out? Otherwise, it will go on and on forever!" He sounded almost desperate, and it wasn't like I didn't want to know...

Then I remembered when he threatened Luke with a couple of kitchen knives.

I took a step back, smiling impishly: "Well, I'd like to, really... just, it would be unfair, wouldn't it? It's something that you need to figure out on your own..."

And before my curiosity pushed me into doing something nice for him, I turned and ran away, briefly glancing over my shoulder ready to enjoy the dismay on his face only to see that he had gone back to speaking to himself. "He's all kinds of bat-shit crazy..." I muttered before slapping my hands on my mouth and looking around. Grover was nowhere in sight. I sighed in relief, it wouldn't do to curse with that childish goat-kid around after all.

## **Chapter 5: Heritage**

**I thank Megapede for the Betaing!**

## HERITAGE

17 October 1999

I strolled through the woods, completing my lazy patrol and returning into the clearing where the flag I was to protect was standing.

I sighed, Chiron may have thought that this shit taught me something, but he was quite mistaken.

I would have made myself scarce when all the demigods were called like I had done every other time. Unfortunately, Chiron had caught up with my constant absences and banished me from his healing lessons until I started 'actively participating'.

He was a very knowledgeable centaur, one that had seen the greatest heroes of all time blossom under his tutelage, one that managed to adapt his teaching style to the times we were living in, which was nothing short of astonishing.

He was wise, knowledgeable, and a dangerous fighter. Despite being half horse, he could spot sloppy footwork with the same accuracy he could land an arrow in a fly's ass from a hundred meters. So I wasn't going to ignore his orders, I got that capturing the flag was a war simulation, but I wouldn't be leading an army anytime soon, and I had other stuff I would have preferred learning.

For example, since Dionysus' graceful revelation, I had been trying to harness and understand my 'grandson of Poseidon' power. With little to no success, but it was likely because I was trying to do it without a natural body of water, no rivers, no lake, no ocean. I wanted to get to know my power on my own. I was still wary of Dionysus mark, I wasn't eager to master my power oy with Poseidon meddling.

Instead, I sat down in the clearing, wrapping myself in several layers of Mist out of habit, bored out of my mind.

Five minutes later, a seven-man team composed of an uneven mix of children of Ares, Hephaestus, and Athena came in.

*Alarms! Defence breach!* I thought, almost laughing out loud.

"They didn't let anyone here as a last line of defence?" a son of Athena asked.

"Obviously not, c'mon, let's get out of here before we're cut off from our lines." the Ares' son, who I recognized as one of the goons who tried to bully me the previous year said.

Soon, the clearing was once more empty. I tilted my head, looking in a specific place in the clearing: the air shimmered and the Mist briefly lifted itself, revealing the actual flag.

I smirked: if I had to play, I would make sure to win so badly that nobody would ever want me to participate again.

04 January 2000

Thalia, Luke, and I were in cabin 1, enjoying our relax-time, the jukebox that I had stolen, and modified with David's help, was merrily filling our ears with 'Enter Sandman' by the incomparable Metallica.

The cabin was... white. White marble everywhere, with golden linings on the bunk beds, silks as covers... It was luxury, simple as that. Even more so since I was used to the less than lacklustre cabin 11.

"I'm bored!" Thalia whined.

I exchanged an eye-roll with Luke, the daughter of Zeus could act incredibly spoiled when in private, and the son of Hermes smirked.

"We could train with the sword." Luke proposed.

"I'd like that, I'm almost your equal, you know." I grinned, while the demigoddess huffed.

"Nobody likes a braggart I-ca-rus." Thalia grumbled, stretching out my name.

"I would feel better if it wasn't true, I always had a gift with the sword, and I've been using it for years, you've grown in leaps and bounds." Luke grumbled.

"I'm still bored, we do the same stuff every day." Thalia whined again.

"No, you're feeling the cage, it's different." I retorted.

"So... we're going to NY? I reckon we could manage to sneak into a concert or something." Luke offered.

I shrugged: "I don't mind..."

"Been there, done that. Oh, wait, I love this part!" Thalia jumped up from her bed.

And she started to sing along with a crystalline voice:

~Somethings wrong, shut the light

Heavy thoughts tonight

And they aren't of Snow White~

By then I had joined her:

~Dreams of war, dreams of liars

Dreams of dragon's fire

And of things that will bite

Sleep with one eye open

Gripping your pillow tight!~

Luke rolled his eyes, muttering something about rock obsessed idiots, but he added his voice to the refrain.

~Exit, light

Enter, night

Take my hand

We're off to never-never land~

"Gods Luke, you could kill the Fates with that voice."

"Shut up Thalia!" he tossed her a pillow.

Life was good.

12 February 2000

The sun was shining brightly, the sky was suspiciously cloudless, and the breeze was already dragging with it the first scent of summer.

I had surrendered, getting a handle on my 'nephew of Poseidon'-powers had been impossible. That was why I was standing with the waves hitting my knees on the beach of long island.

I already felt more alive, more aware. My senses were sharper, my body stronger. I felt free in a way that even my previous living alone couldn't compare to. I knelt, the almost freezing water felt nicely fresh against my skin. The waves refusing to make me budge, instead they were accepting, almost rooting me in place with their strange embrace.

Logic could only lead me so far. Ultimately, it was obvious, but difficult to accept, that every religion was based on an act of faith.

Faith in what? The gods represented natural and human forces, from Zeus who ruled the Sky, to Aphrodite who ruled over Love itself. I had little doubt that gods were somehow born from human imagination, after all, there were proofs of the Big Bang and of Dinosaurs. The likely, logical conclusion, was that while the universe and humans had begun their existence as the scientists know it, at some point in time things changed. Hopes, dreams, and stories shared around the fire came to life. I hazily remembered about Norse and Egyptian demigods after all. So when somebody asked which origin of the world and which gods were real, the answer would be 'all and none'.

Likely, some what-the-fuck-Force developed along with gravity and strong-weak nuclear force. The what-the-fuck-Force was some kind of magic that turned beliefs and dreams of large numbers of sufficiently complex creatures into reality, and since said beliefs placed a primordial of some kind at the beginning, maybe it worked retroactively.

That realization, however, wasn't freeing me from my conundrum.

I took a deep breath, before exhaling, and started swimming toward the open sea. The current seemed almost eager to bring me out of the safety of the beach, but while I did mind, there was nothing to it. An act of faith was my best bet.

Soon, I had left the relative safety of the little bay. When I somehow felt the waters were deep enough for what I was thinking, I took a deep breath and dived.

Five meters, ten... the pressure wasn't making me uncomfortable, and while I was slowly letting go of the air, I still had some time before needing a new lungful of it. 20 meters and I was still going. 50 meters, and it became clear that I had dived in some crack of the seafloor. I emptied my lungs and remained still, my body being dragged down by gravity. Soon enough, I was at 150 meters.

At 200 meters of depth, the light dimmed, the water had gone from crystalline to light blue to poisonous green. I was in the twilight zone. And I needed to breathe. My chest was aching, begging me for a breath of fresh air. I dived in my power, feeling it churning under my skin, easing my pain, albeit briefly. I inhaled.

I had scrunched my eyes closed, unwilling to see my surroundings in case it turned out Poseidon refused me.

I had ambrosia in my pocket in case my act of faith didn't work and I needed some pepper up to reach the surface, but the thing is, in a world where myth hides just behind the corner, acts of faith are often rewarded.

I breathed in, and I felt the sea.

I felt how it weighted on the ocean floor, how the wind rippled against the waves. I felt fifteen dolphins swimming at the border of my senses, a swarm of fishes I could likely identify if I could be bothered, and a curious tiger shark circling me.

I exhaled and inhaled again. My eyes didn't see more clearly, but I knew my surroundings in the same way I knew my body when I closed my eyes.

I watched my hands, marvelling at the layer of... air? *something?*... just above my skin. I poked my forearm, feeling my smooth skin like I was on land.

I opened my arms, throwing my senses across the water, feeling the rocks and the sand, feeling the currents that didn't move me without my consent, knowing not only the depth I was at but also my position in the sea. I laughed, the water whirling cheerfully around me. How the hell any of that was happening, I didn't exactly understand, but if there was something that the sea was telling me, it was that sometimes I thought too much.

With a flex of will, I collected the energy from the evermoving currents of the sea, moving said energy just like I moved my arm, and as I shrouded myself in it, I threw myself to the surface, stopping suddenly short of breaking it, an image of a lightning bolt crashing me in mid-air suddenly flared in my mind.

Still three meters from the surface, I twirled the water around me, calling forth a current to return to the camp Half-blood. I didn't know how fast I was going... but surely faster than I could run.

I exploded from the water and rolled out my momentum on the beach, I was panting, but I could feel it. The sea, the waves, like a second heart in my gut.

I smiled at the sunny sky, I could work with that.

Roughly a month later, I managed to spot Thalia in the arena, tossing around Ares' children with the sublime combination of spear and shield. It reminded me of Troy: the Achilles versus Hector scene. She handled three older demigods with ease.

She alternated thrusting the spear and using it as a blunt hammer. The first kind of attack made her opponents recoil, the second forced them to hide behind shields, their knees buckling under the impossible strength exercised by the thirteen years old girl.

I felt it again, Poseidon heritage thrumming in my chest. I recognized the air smelling of ozone, and a part of me saw Thalia as... enemy.

The sane part of my mind found fascinating the idea of rivalry among gods bleeding over to their mortal offspring. And grandfather Poseidon's enmities reach even me... I snorted at the monicker I had given to the Stormbringer, arguably one of the most terrifying gods out there.

*Does this mean that their power is tied to their identity? And both to their blood?* I wondered.

The more I realized about the world I was in, the more fascinating the questions became. I wasn't going to pull an Orochimaru and start experimenting on demigods, but I could see the appeal.

I was watching Thalia intently, feeling her power spiking occasionally. It wasn't an aura, nor the occasional smell of ozone, but there was a sense of... foreboding. Like the sky was about to fall on you, and somehow said feeling could be tracked back to Thalia.

I wondered how nobody else seemed to notice. *Maybe it is my being 75% god?* I wondered. I scoffed. If godhood followed Mendel's laws, regular demigods should have a mutant mesh of blood and ichor, and the same went for me, even if with a different ratio. No, the distance between gods and men wasn't something that could be measured with numbers. And yet demigods survived ambrosia and nectar, where it would have killed a regular human.

That was without talking about the magical mumbo jumbo that was the demigods' powers over their godly parent' domain.

Maybe... *a god is his domain.* I speculated. Thalia had gone along the planned thieving for the previous end of summer party, in the same way, Zeus broke his word on not having children. Yet, the king of the gods also ruled over The Rightful Law, of something like that.

*Did his adherence to the sacrality of the law wane along with humanity growing loss of moral values?* After all, the higher one climbed on the mortals' social ladder, the more exposed he became to compromise and bribery. But again, I wasn't so naïve as to believe corruption, rape, and whatnot didn't exist during Agamemnon's rule. Still, morality is a matter of perception, and the law is its reflection. I think immortality has its own way to completely skewer whatever moral compass one has, didn't Athena the Wise turn Arachne into a spider only because the mortal won their little bet?

*What about the other religions?* I wondered. I was reasonably sure that the author of the fantasy world I was in had squeezed all the money he could from the franchise, bringing in Egyptian and Norse gods and demigods as well.

I frowned, noticing my memories of my past lives becoming hazier the longer I lived in this reality.

It was unsettling. But for the life of mine, I couldn't figure out how to put a stop to it. In the Greek pantheon, every life was guided by the Fates. Each role revealed by her very name: Clotho spun the thread of life, Lachesis measured its allotted length, and Atropos cut it off with her shears. Sometimes, each of the Fates was assigned to a specific time: Atropos the past, Clotho the present, and Lachesis the future. Arguably, Clotho plucked my soul previous life and with Lachesis she spun me into this reality.



Where does free will fall into all of this...? Was I there to do her bidding? But no, Fate found a way to resolve itself anyway. Did that mean someone else cashed in an I Owe You from them? But who could hope to strongarm the Fates?

From what I knew, they were fatherless daughters of Nyx herself, a fucking primordial. And she wasn't the ruler of the night in the same way Uranus wasn't the ruler of the sky. Nyx was the night, and something more. In ancient times, before men managed to tame fire, the night was full of terrors, it was the unknown, the not-understandable, the endless mystery.

Nyx was a daughter of Chaos, her nature defied definition, I doubted that she owed anything to anyone, or needed to concern herself with a little demigod among mortals.

Yet, there was an inky darkness in the hut where I grew up. I remembered.

I shook my head, looking again in the arena. I grinned when I noticed Thalia had found another soon-to-be-sorry group of demigods to spar against.

I didn't know if my parentage would make me more powerful than the daughter of Zeus. I knew that the growth of my skills wasn't normal, even for a demigod, but power itself wasn't easily defined.

I remembered with absolute clarity 'my sister' 's lessons: Magic is based on intent, like every other action performed by sentient creatures'.

"I'm starting to believe that my sister was my godly mother in disguise..." I muttered, before pushing away that thought. It would have explained why I had never thought to question her. Hell, I don't even know her name.

Intent, intent... I mused silently, returning to a more interesting problem.

It made some kind of sense, after all, I hardly believed that Poseidon used magic words to raise the tide. Hell, I knew the moon was mostly responsible for it.

I was a firm believer that knowledge was power, and that knowledge didn't exist without understanding. Magically understanding something meant that somehow I needed to know it through my gut. I knew all kinds of facts about everything, tides and waves, coral reefs, and whatnot. My act of faith, I believed, had granted me some understanding over the sea.

I knew that stuff didn't happen only because of 'magic'. *Physics is real goddamn it!* I frowned. Gods were personifications of the natural forces birthed by the human mind. The different genesis of the world second each religion crashed horribly against each other.

I sighed. *Thoughts for another time.* I hopped into the arena and grabbed a training gladius from the rack. The blade itself was fifty centimetres long, the blunted edge

shining under the sun. The handle was wrapped with leather, and I gave a pair of swings, it was a bit unbalanced towards the blade. But that only meant that I would be using it more as a hammer than anything else.

"Thalia, do you ever wish to hit something without holding back?" I asked with what I felt was an impish grin worming its way on my face.

She looked at me, an almost wistful smile on her face: "Yeah... but I don't want to kill half of the demigods by mistake."

I called forth my power. Seeing through and manipulating the Mist was delicate, soft. Instead, the kind of magic mumbo jumbo I had inherited from Poseidon was anything but: it was uncaring, untameable, heavy. It wasn't a magic core, it wasn't some abstract reserve of energy. It was, simply put, my will. My willingness to crush, my acceptance of collateral damage, my uncaringness about the consequences.

The air went from smelling of ozone to feeling like a sea breeze, water nebulized around me, evaporating briefly, and leaving a salt layer on my skin before getting wet again.

Exhilarating didn't even begin to cover it. I swung distractedly my borrowed blade, it blurred through the air, light as a walking cane.

I tied it to my belt and picked up a spear from another rack. I was a fourteen years old kid, standing at 1.63 meters tall, while the weapon was easily 2.50 meters long.

With my right hand tightly wrapped around the spear, I pressed down, almost embedding its head in the ground, before kicking with all my strength, snapping the ash wood exactly where I wanted it to break.

I whirled my two meters long staff around me, letting my body get used to its feel and balance.

I saw Thalia's eyes widening and her mouth opening in a little, surprised 'o', before her usually cobalt blue irises turned more... electric, with grey streaks, promising a thunderstorm. She looked at me not understanding what had just changed.

She knew me, I was easy going and laid back, albeit devious when necessary. And yet, in the same way, I had felt her 'presence' change before, she now felt me. Foreboding.

She licked her lips, that curled up showing just too many teeth for it to be a smile.

"I promise I can take it." I muttered. I was looking at her like a hungry wolf would look at a scared rabbit, and she was doing the same.

Never one to wait, Thalia charged forward, feinting hopping from one foot to the other, trying to unbalance me.

She lunged with the spear, aiming at my chest, I tilted to my right, my feet at shoulder width and my knees half bent. At the same time, I retaliated lunging with my staff, held in my right hand.

It impacted soundly against Thalia's copy of the Aegis, bulls eyeing Medusa's forehead.

My left hand clamped on Thalia's spear and I completed my twirl leveraging on my right foot, pulling her as strong as I could.

While I succeeded in unbalancing her, she jumped forward and slammed her shield on my back, or at least she tried to.

I flattened myself against the ground and added momentum to my spin, my left leg swiping the ground and the back of her calves just when she had managed to regain her balance.

She tumbled on the ground, bringing down her shield like it was a cleaver. I immediately jumped back, demigod or not, being struck with the edge of her shield would have fractured my tibia.

I was grinning madly, and Thalia had the same expression. I was hopping on my feet, I was thriving in our friendly conflict.

21 March 2000

"They won't grant us a quest." Luke rolled his eyes, "You must know that."

"Well, I never said anything about asking for permission." I shrugged.

Thalia grinned at my answer: "Do you have something in mind? At least something that won't get us flayed alive once we return?"

Luke and I looked at her with raised eyebrows.

She huffed: "Okay, something that won't get you two flayed alive as punishment and me without dessert for a month?"

It had been hard, but Luke and I had managed to point out to Thalia that whatever happened, the fucking King of the Gods was keeping an eye out for her.

That had been... an interesting conversation.

"There is a statue of Tyche. In a museum in Istanbul, I believe..." I returned on track, "She's the goddess of luck, more or less."

Luke snorted: "You want to cross the world to steal a statue?"

I arched an eyebrow, as I were to say 'what of it?'

"I'm in!" Thalia almost started dancing in joy at the prospect of leaving the camp.

"We'll need a plane..." I reminded her.

She paled. "Thinking about it, I'm perfectly fine with staying at the camp."

I snorted. She still was scared of heights, it was hilarious.

On the following night, around 3 am, I had entered the woods armed only with a sword and bullheadedness. My grandfather was Poseidon, my father some nameless demigod (who I thanked for the blood that granted me access to one of the most powerful domains) who had likely been seduced into the Lotus casino by my mother.

*My mother.* Chance didn't exist, my soul came from another world, I was sure, after all, I had years of (albeit fuzzy) memories even when I was five. A brain of a five years old isn't wired to understand abstract thought. So somehow memories were tied to my soul.

Which made sense, since people kept living in the underworld. I distractedly ducked under a branch and kept walking, taking notice of the occasional creepy noise coming from around me. I knew there were monsters in the forest, but my control over the Mist was so tight that it managed to trick even them.

None of the fates could be my mother, Nyx was out of the question. Which female immortal could manage something like that?

Then it hit me. *I'm a fucking idiot.*

I grew up with a fucking witch that taught me the basis of magic. *Hecate.*

The goddess of magic, witchcraft, the night, crossroads, moon, ghosts, and necromancy. She was the only child of the Titanes Perses and Asteria from whom she received her power over heaven, earth, and sea.

Who else could pull a soul from another reality only for shit and giggles?

"Hecate, the one who works from afar..." I muttered, still walking across the woods  
"Wasn't she a virgin goddess?" I frowned, then I remembered that Athena was one too.

But what did it mean? *Let's think about my grandparents on my mother's side.*

Perses was a Titan, son of the Titans Crius and Eurybia. He represented destruction and peace. My grandmother would be Asteria, another Titan, daughter of the Titans Coeus

and Phoebe and sister of Leto. Asteria was the Titan who ruled over nocturnal oracles and shooting stars. *Bizarre fields to work in.*

I entered a large, oval-shaped clearing, the trees parting enough to let me see the sky without interruption. The full moon looked far closer than it should have.

It made so much sense! Magic itself was difficult to define, and it wasn't clear if it had any limit, after all, Circe turned people into pigs all the time, medea rose an army of skeletons from a bunch of dragon teeth...

Necromancy? I was almost sure I had died before.

I still didn't receive strange vibes from the moon, but... I stopped my furious train of thought and simply stared at a sudden flickering light among the trees. Weaving her way among the trunks, a woman walked towards me, a torch holding a silvery fire held high above her head.

I shut down my urge to snort. *Typical godly-drama-queen.*

She stopped in front of me, a mocking smile on her thin lips. She was wearing casual trekking clothes. Boots and black cargo pants, a grey t-shirt under a leather jacket, there was a thick, bronze-looking key tied to her belt.

She had pitch-black, shoulder-length hair which moved in waves, a large forehead, and a straight nose. Her irises were of a smoke-ish dark gray, with the occasional silver spark in it, the same as my right eye.

"Hecate." I narrowed my eyes: "goddess of magic, witchcraft, night, crossroads, moon, ghosts and necromancy."

Her smirk widened when I took what I hoped was a threatening step forward: "What have you done?"

If she was shocked by my open hostility, she didn't show it: "A masterpiece." she grinned, and the way she was looking at me made clear that she was referring to me.

"Why would you bring me here?" I insisted: I wanted to know if there was some price to pay for living the life of a demigod in a fanfiction universe.

"I don't rule over crossroads as much as I rule over choice, which is easily represented by crossroads, it's another reason why mortals often described me as three-faced." she answered.

"I didn't choose this." I countered.

"Didn't you? Perhaps, but in any case, the dead can hardly choose, can they?" she grinned some more, "Even if I admit it, I took you because you were always choosing. I wanted to see for myself the kind of change your choices would bring here."

I frowned, there was something... I couldn't remember.

"What do you want? What do you gain from my existence?" I pressed her.

"At the very least, I can see how you stumble your way through magic, I'll get a laugh out of it." Her smile turned devious.

"You're more of a Titan than a Goddess, aren't you?" I accused her, trying to unbalance her and force her to reveal something more about my situation.

Her carefree smile dimmed a bit at my accusation, and she tilted her head, clearly seeing through my attempt to gain some leverage over her: "Icarus dear, I strongly suggest you plan better which battles you chose to fight in. I am Hecate, the Three-Faced, and I have power over heaven, earth, and sea, *I bestow wealth and all the blessings of daily life. I have shown the way to the ones looking for Persephone when she was taken, my passage is accompanied by voices of thunder, the shriek of the lost and the yells of the ones who failed.*" As she spoke her tone went from slightly warm to chilling and uncaring, evergrowing in volume until it felt like she was speaking through the voices of screaming silvers of wind, thousands of voices among the shadows and between the strands that made up the tapestry of reality.

Suddenly, almost like I had only been imagining it, her voice returned normal and her presence receded, the air began to flow in and out of my lungs once more, and I found my muscles answering once more to my will. "I know of your defiance and dreams of freedom, little one, I wouldn't expect anything less, but remember, that as you choose freely, you're mine, and are already serving me."

She rose her second hand, which was suddenly holding a twin torch to the one she held since the beginning, and started to walk away, the moonlit night losing that veneer of impossibility I hadn't realized it had assumed: "Remember me as you learn my magic, little Icarus, and beware to not fly too close to the Sun."

I narrowed my eyes. *I will learn magic, because it's cool, not because of you.*

I would have loved to have a brilliant comeback, but she kept referring to my choices... choices I didn't remember. *Ok, how do I take back my memories?*

## **Chapter 6: Titan's fear**

**I thank Megapede for the Beta-work!**

## AN ACTUAL QUEST

31 March 2000

Fighting against Thalia was strange.

I knew it, she knew it, but I could never exactly put my finger on it.

I had taken lessons from the children of Ares in my first months at the camp, but the more we fought, the less their way of fighting stuck with me. Ares children were fearsome warriors, that was for sure, their manoeuvres, techniques, and moves were well polished and part of a bigger picture. When I forced myself, I could even copy some of them. Otherwise, in a semi-serious fight, like the one I was having with Thalia, their teachings tended to slide off me, leaving me with only my gut as a guide.

Instead of worsening my performance, I became much ...more: faster, stronger, less predictable. And Thalia was the same.

I had left behind staff, spear, shield, and sword, even if I was competent in the use of each one, to take up twin hatchets in their stead. My movements were wide, a surge of unrelenting attack and a deep breath in retreat, bringing myself into her guard and then out of her reach. Over her shield and behind her, like a waver rolling over a rock.

The blades of my one-handed axes were describing circular patterns in the air, from time to time, I used the wood of the handles as a hammer against Thalia's shield. Suddenly, I understood what was happening. My movements recalled the sea, the rhythm mimicking the up and down of the waves, alternating times in which I kept attacking to periods during which I stood on the defensive.

In that, I behaved like the tides, but during my attack-phase... oh it was glorious.

My right hand slid upwards on the wooden handle, bringing my knuckles under the blade of the bearded axe, and I punched in an upward swing at the tip of Thalia's spear, which sizzled less than three centimetres from my head, the wind rushing around it and pushing me back.

I rolled with it, twisting my torso as I let the momentum make my left hand slide down the handle of my other weapon, increasing my range and the strength of its impact against Thalia's raised shield. A low boom resonated in the arena as the demigoddess was forced to stumble and I brought both my arms together, adjusting my grip on my chosen weapons, and spun myself, bringing them again against her shield.

Thalia lowered her centre and tanked the blow from behind her shield, her spear skyrocketing against my shoulder from behind her defence.

Her head was hidden, meaning that it was a blind blow, but nonetheless, it was accurate.

I twisted once more, letting the wind brought with her spear guide my momentum, only to fall back when she charged me with her shield.

She pushed with the strength of a blizzard, my right bearded axe bit the edge of her shield and I pulled her in, guiding her momentum and essentially swapping our places.

Where on large scale my movements resembled either the sea during a storm or a whirlpool, the swiftness which I displayed as I avoided blows was akin to a small torrent coursing through rocks, Thalia's style switched between lightning fast strikes and the unrelenting pressure of a gale, while the air lightly slapped most of my blows off course. It was a subtle, subconscious thing, the air naturally coursing to counter my movements and to help hers.

I didn't mind, it kept me on a high, and forced me to adapt constantly to her movements.

We were deadly, fast, strong... powerful. I could imagine why the gods would be nervous about our existence.

Why am I so much aware of how she is using her power but she doesn't even realize it? I wondered.

"Let's... stop... for today." I panted after having delivered a powerful kick to her midriff, gaining myself some much-needed room to breathe.

"Why?... Are... You..." She didn't even have the breath to finish her taunt.

I hobbled toward the water bottles neatly stacked on one side of the arena and downing one over my head, feeling my sore muscles stop aching and my breath slowing down. Water healing magic powers are totally a cheat code.

Muscles tore down under great effort and regrew stronger than before after some time. Water in any shape or form let me completely bypass the 'time' factor.

Maybe I can feel how much the god in me affects my development because Hekate rules over magic. I speculated, before returning my attention to Thalia, who was downing her bottle of water, her eyes closed in bliss, and her chest heaving quickly.

My eyes stayed glued to her form for a couple of seconds more than strictly necessary, before sweeping over the other demigods in the arena or on the stands.

At 14 years old, Thalia had tackled puberty with determination, and as a fifteen years old male, it mattered little if I was a reincarnation or not, I stared.

The other demigods did the same, even if maybe they were still awed by our mock-duels, given the amount of attention I was receiving from both sexes.



"Too tired to continue, then?" her voice made me turn towards her.

I snorted: "Hardly, but I have to check in with David, we have a couple of projects going on..."

I eyed the two hatchets I had been using for the past month with a mixture of dissatisfaction and mistrust. They worked for me, but in the same measure, I could make everything work whenever I fought following my gut.

I had gotten better at it, at the point where I could almost foretell my next moves, and I was slowly forcing myself to incorporate kicks in my repertoire. For whatever reason, if I were to follow only my instincts, I would use my foot only to stomp over something.

"You can admit it, you know." Luke quipped from behind me.

*FUCK YOU LUKE!* I pretended that he didn't startle me with his sudden appearance: "Thalia clicks with shield and spear, you click with the sword, I'm looking for a weapon that clicks." I answered scrunching lightly my nose.

"Well, you've become dangerous with those things." Thalia conceded "You caught me flat-footed when you used one as brass knuckles."

I grinned at that: "They are versatile aren't they?"

"They're made to chop wood." Luke deadpanned.

"And they can chop arms just as easily." I overruled his objection, turning one upside down and trying to discern how it would work as a baton.

I started walking away without looking back, considering what kind of weapon would work better for me.

"I still don't know why he can't use a sword. Or two slightly shorter ones, a sword is perfect. It's the white weapon by definition, you know." I heard Luke protest behind my back.

I could imagine Thalia rolling her eyes at his well-practised rant in defence of his favourite weapon while I made my way through the camp towards the Haephestus' cabin's backyard. Which was a cross between a giant warehouse and a blacksmith wet dream. Forge, workbench, whetstones, engines half-broken apart, half turned in something else with animal-like features.

I dropped the two hatchets in a shed near the woods and walked to the workbench number 8, where a familiar demigod was hunched down, scribbling madly with a pencil over a nondescript piece of wood.

"You know that writing on paper is much easier, yes?" I introduced my presence while plopping down on an empty crate that I turned upside down.

The man rolled his eyes and dropped what he was doing after a couple of minutes that I spent watching him intently in complete silence.

"You do realize how unnerving it is having someone with mismatched eyes stare at you in complete silence, yes?" he snarked while rummaging through a pile of something behind the workbench.

I smiled earnestly at David, son of Hephaestus when he slid to me what I had stolen, bargained, and traded for.

I forgot to comment on his snark, busy as I was with taking in the box I helped design and create.

"Does it work?" I asked, carefully sliding my fingers over it.

The box was in celestial bronze, of a rectangular shape, 70x25x15 centimetres, and was covered in greek letters which could slide on several tracks, their inner workings beyond what one could discern with a simple look.

"Obviously, I finished the tests yesterday, it won't break, nor it will run out of power." David answered. "It's a pity we cannot market it with the mortals, otherwise we would be settled, but I have to admit that whatever shit you did with the runes made all the difference in the world."

"And about the other project?" I asked, distractedly trailing my hands over the beads and corks of my necklace.

"I just got started, it will take time to find the right materials and for the testing, but I like your designs." He grumbled as an answer.

"Is this... is this respect?" I asked, mocking his uncharacteristically serious tone.

When he tossed at me a scrap of bronze, I knew I had already overstayed my welcome, and hightailed out of their backyard.

I walked to the edge of the woods, and at a three-way crossroad where the paths lead respectively to the cabins, the arena, and the strawberry fields, I took the fourth road.

Not that anyone would have noticed it.

Crossroads may have been a mere symbol of free choice, but they still fell under my mother's domain, and that put them squarely under my thrall.

I walked slowly for twenty minutes, checking on the multitude of layers of mist that I had spun among the ash trees that lined the path, and occasionally undoing one that was unravelling only to place another one in its place.

I quickened my pace when I heard the waves, and after a couple of minutes, I reached my abode.

It was a lucky place on the coastline, the uncharacteristically rocky beach held enough dirt to allow trees to thrive. Thrive was maybe too big of a word, but they managed to survive well enough, even if they couldn't compare to the titans of my native forest.

I walked down toward the sea, rounding on a big ass rock and reaching the secluded spot where I had built my home, only a few meters above sea level. Again, 'home' may have been a bit of a stretch: my tent was pitched against one of the big rocks that stood tall in a semicircle, shielding me from both wind and sight.

I ducked in and dropped the contraption I had retrieved from David, before picking up a two-handed axe that somehow had made its way into my hands and a low pile of stainless pipes held together by strips of leather.

I made my way back into the forest, walking slightly uphill until I found a creek.

Once I was there, I started using the head of the celestial bronze axe to draw an almost perfectly straight line back to my home.

For the following four hours, I put to work every ounce of energy my body was capable of setting up a course for the pipes to follow.

The pipeline was one hundred and twelve meters long, and the water fell in a trickle over a side of my secluded place, like a bad imitation of a waterfall that somehow had managed to be pitied enough by the gods to be allowed to exist.

In that way, my home had potable water. It was cold, and the flow was a joke, but it was more than I had had in the morning, so I couldn't complain.

Looking with a grimace to my axe, I walked back into the forest, looking for the trees that I would need to build my... well, I had little hope that it would ever turn out as anything different from a hut.

10 July 2000

"Run that by me again." I repeated.

We were all sitting around on one of the free beds of cabin one, the loyal jukebox quietly playing Cherry Pie by the Warrant.

~ She's my cherry pie

Cool drink of water, such a sweet surprise

Tastes so good, makes a grown man cry

Sweet Cherry Pie, yeah ~

"I met with my father." Luke repeated.

"I think he got that Luke." Thalia stage whispered, trying to joke. A pity I wasn't feeling like it.

"I don't. Not really." I retorted, gaining two surprised glances from the other two demigods.

"We've stolen shit before, Hades, we also did some awesome stuff with it!" I cursed.

"Remember the car racing?" Luke grinned to Thalia.

She turned her enthusiasm for the fond memory into a very likable virtuosic over the song:

~ If I think about baseball, I'll swing all night, yeah

Yeah, yeah

Swingin' in the living room, swingin' in the kitchen

Most folks don't 'cause they're too busy bitchin' ~

"Yeah like the totally illegal, underage car racing in Long Island." I nodded, remembering the crazy night with a smile. Gotta love the super reflexes that half godhood grants.

"But focus," I repeated, snapping my fingers: "gods don't appear out of the blue on their own, we all know that. So either he wanted something, or more likely, you called him."

Luke grimaced a bit at my bitter tone, we both ignored Thalia's blush along with her trilling:

~ Swingin' in there 'cause she wanted me to feed her

So I mixed up the batter and she licked the beater

I scream, you scream, we all scream for her

Don't even try 'cause you can't ignore her

She's my cherry pie

Cool drink of water, such a sweet surprise ~

And we both willfully entertained the double entendre with Thalia as a protagonist that naturally jumped to mind, the heaviness of the topic enough to ground us.

"Yeah, I ... kinda asked for a quest." He admitted.

And that stopped even the blushing Thalia, bringing a cute frown on her forehead: "You didn't tell us that part."

She still had a less than meaningful relationship with Zeus, and the idea of asking for something, or even worse, to cater to the whims of her father didn't hold any kind of appeal.

Luke grimaced: "Listen, not everybody is happy like you two. Thalia, you have this cabin for yourself and don't have to prove anything to anyone. Icarus, you somehow managed to find a house for yourself, don't think that nobody in the cabin noticed, and no offence, but you don't fucking care about anything beyond me, Thalia, and whatever shit you're building with David."

I frowned heavily and made to object when he went on: "For whatever reason, you refused to come to visit the Olympus on the winter solstice, and still you somehow got blessed by Mr. D, which sounds bad, but it means that the at least one god acknowledged you, I am not that lucky, okay? I got dropped and forgotten in my father's cabin along with forty other demigods!"

"Wow, Woah, slow down." I waved my hands in front of me in what I hoped was a placating gesture: "First of all Mr. D. didn't bless me, he likes me because I manage to get him drunk once a year without breaking the rules of his punishment. Second, I'll stay as far from the gods as I can, thank you very much."

After the thunder from outside and the snicker from Thalia had died down, I went on: "And... forgotten? Really? Half of the camp looks up to you, you're the most capable swordsman since forever, and..."

"Spare me." He cut my objection "That's not the point."

"It kind of is..." Thalia objected: "Why do you feel we forgot you? Why do you feel like you need... I dunno, more? And why asking a god? That's just... it doesn't make any sense!"

He grumbled something unintelligible before jumping down the bed and starting pacing, his arms straight down his sides and his hands opening and closing, like he was looking for something to strangle.

"It doesn't matter." He refused to answer.

Ah, teen angst, the great constant across the multiverse. My fingers drew small circles on my temples, and I took a breath to calm down.

Why does a random teen go all antsy-angsty without a reason? Oh yes, for problems that usually don't exist... They unleash random insecurity and the need to boast to overcome it, jealousy over nothing, fear of rejection, questioning self-worth when the truth is that nobody cares... I listed off in my head.

~ Tastes so good, make a grown man cry

Sweet cherry pie, oh yeah

She's my cherry pie

Put a smile on your face, ten miles wide

Looks so good, bring a tear to your eye

Sweet cherry pie, yeah ~

"The point is that I gotta steal a golden apple, and the Oracle said to go with only one companion, I asked Thalia, I leave in a week." Once that he had said his piece, he turned his back and bolted out of Cabin 1.

The revelation hit me like a mace: "He's jealous."

"What?" Thalia frowned.

I looked at the demigoddess and back to the now-closed door of Zeus' cabin.

"You're Zeus' child, I'm the son of nobody, I share his cabin and managed to distinguish myself throwing parties and organizing unofficial quests to bring stuff to the camp..." I reasoned.

"He's extraordinary with a sword, but we're both more powerful, if we actually let loose we could snap him like a twig." She frowned and followed my thoughts.

"You have spent a lot of time together before meeting me, relying on each other, and protecting Annabeth. Then since we came to the camp, you and I have spent more and more time together, either to train or to sing or whatnot." I concluded.

She snorted: "It would make sense, but Luke isn't like that."

"Isn't he?" I retorted: "Traditionally the quests go by teams of three, you and I are the most powerful demigods this place has seen in many years, and he asks only you?"

Thalia grimaced, distractedly biting her lower lip, and she fidgeted in her seated position.

"Shit!" She cursed and hopped down from the bed, pacing just like Luke did, only with her arms crossed and shooting me glance after a glance, only to shook her head and mutter stuff too quietly for me to hear.

"Jealous." She repeated.

Then she shook her head violently, her hair whipping against her flushed cheeks.

I rose from my seated position and walked over to her, tilting my head questioningly. I didn't say anything, she clearly had some kind of epiphany, to either reveal it or mull it over was her choice.

The fates know that I keep most of my thoughts to myself. I thought.

"I'll go with him." She told me.

Not that I doubted it, but it was clear that her thoughts had been rolling in a completely different direction.

The questions burned on my lips but I held them back.

You know what he is jealous about. Tell me.

"It was obvious." I deadpanned.

There is something wrong. Tell me.

"I'll leave you to your preparations then?"

She shook her head lightly before answering: "Yeah, it would be for the best."

I squeezed her shoulder and left the cabin: "If you want to talk, I'm game, you know?" I tossed over my shoulder.

There was something wrong in her reaction, but I couldn't read her mind, nor I was eager to spend more effort than strictly necessary dealing with whatever trouble had just come up, so I made my way to the beach where us, the over 12-year-old demigods, held our parties at the end of the summer.

It was almost time for the sun to drop below the horizon, my shadow stretched long on the ground, climbing over the little mounds of sand and dropping in the small holes left by seagulls in search of crabs and other potential food.

I felt the constant swaying of the waves soothe me, but still, I was perturbed, and not by Luke's mission, I remembered he had something to do near Mount Otri, but there was something... in the way Luke and Thalia had behaved, but also in the way they had looked at me, the son of Hermes like I had hurt him, and Thalia had suddenly discovered shyness.

I dropped on the sand, looking at the cloudy sky, trying to find a reason behind their strange actions.

After a while, something dropped on the side of my head, startling me and tossing grain of sand over my face.

I shot forward spluttering and staring confused at the leather canteen that had almost landed on my head, before raising my eyebrows toward the offender who had tossed it.

I did not expect him to be Dionysus.

"Well?" I asked.

"Beer dulls a memory, brandy sets it burning, but wine is the best for a sore heart's yearning." The plump god answered.

"What?" was my eloquent answer.

"I've been standing here for several minutes already, and you didn't notice. I hardly need to be a god to notice something is troubling you." The god of ritual madness quietly replied.

I grabbed the canteen and uncorked the top, sniffing at its contents: "Should I be surprised that your help comes in an alcoholic guise?"

"In my experience, there are two kinds of problems that can weigh down both immortals and mortals." the god sighed, "The problems that one can solve, and those that one can't. Drinking over the latter often lends a new perspective and makes them fall under the first category."

I blinked, confused: "I wasn't aware I had any problems."

After a second, I amended my answer: "Well, I don't know if it's a problem or not, I just don't understand fully what's happening, that is all."



"That places the situation squarely under the second category." The little god laughed delighted: "Knock yourself out with that wine, the canteen will remain full until the end of the month."

My eyebrows skyrocketed, already thinking about how many barrels I could fill before selling them back to the other demigods when Dionisus stopped me:

"And don't bother trying to pour the wine anywhere but in a thirsty mouth, it won't work in that case."

*Party pooper god.* I insulted him in the safe confines of my mind.

"I wouldn't have dreamt of it." I deadpanned out loud.

15 July 2000

I had chosen the rail-road, not that I feared Zeus, but it was obvious that we didn't like each other, and as such, I wanted to avoid crossing his domain without a damn good reason.

From New York to San Francisco it took me 3 days and a half.

A couple of runes on my carriage and I was left alone. No monsters and no people. It'd been... quiet, but after years among other kids, I enjoyed my break, music from the magic-jukebox built-in celestial bronze and wine, along with snacks of various kind. It had been oddly relaxing.

I thanked the mortal and paid with a handful of Mist, before walking towards a plaque.

Mount Tamalpais was protected within public lands such as Mount Tamalpais State Park. It didn't look extremely impressive, and yet, to my sixth sense, it roared. With the side of my eye, I almost saw the clouds swirling in a column around the top.

I sighed and entered the park. I could understand why demigods wanted to go on quests, randomly exploring a place that held the chance of hiding a good battle was thrilling, even if I was wary of facing the promise of a horrible death that was Ladon.

Then I remembered, we wanted to enter the Hesperides' garden, and Ladon's only purpose was to keep guard on the tree of golden apples.

The beast, as well as my target, was likely in the middle of the garden. Now, how to know where to go?

I spent the following hours crossing the garden, looking behind every trunk, among every bush, all without success.

I shook my head, there was magic in the air, and a powerful one, that was unmistakable. And yet I felt there was something just behind the corner of my eyes, not a veil, only... something. It wasn't Mist, I could easily recognize it, but... I couldn't define it, I felt like being on the edge between oil poured over water, but that wasn't quite it.

I sighed, and looked once more to the overbearing mountain: "When in doubt, ask?" I wondered, looking at the Mount Tamalpais, which clearly had a second full-time job as the reincarnation of Mount Otri.

I trekked at a leisurely pace, I had rations in my sack, water, and nobody was running after me.

After thick layers of Mist that gave my talent in manipulating it a run for my money, I reached the top of the mountain. There were ruins, blocks of black granite and marble as big as houses. Broken columns. Statues of bronze that looked as though they'd been half-melted. I whistled slowly, wrapping the Mist tighter around me. It was a dreary place.

A few dozen meters ahead of me, gray clouds swirled in a heavy vortex, making a funnel cloud that almost touched the mountaintop, but instead rested on the shoulders of a man.

I had found out that Immortals were difficult to recognize unless they wanted to, however, there was no possible way to mistake Atlas.

In the middle of the small plateau, he had one knee rammed into the ground, which, surprisingly enough, didn't have a single fissure or crack, and yet few grains of sands seemed to climb one over the other, only to keep falling.

The titan's visible foot was twitching occasionally, minutely shifting the balance of the world's roof.

He had a single loincloth hiding his genitalia, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination. He was bulky, not only that, he was chiselled, every single muscle contracting occasionally, his broad shoulders where something else, I could almost feel the unrelenting strength he was exercising.

"Who's there?" His voice rumbled, it was deep and overwhelming. Titan is too little a word to describe him...

I couldn't tell, but he was likely taller than 2 meters, his black curly hair was cut short and, since he was bent forward, they formed a curtain that hid his face.

I was thinking about how to ask him how to enter the Hesperids' garden, but nobody did anything for nothing. And I had honestly no idea what he could want.

When in doubt...

I let the Mist surrounding me fall apart, letting the being who was holding the sky to see me.

Immediately, the Titan rose his head, his eyes pinning me where I stood. He had regal features, a cross between elegant and sharp, which gifted him an aura of command that tried to ensnare me. His eyes were pitch black, no white, with occasional grey streaks flashing through.

I sat where I was, not trusting myself in going closer. I was sitting where the Sky wanted to shag the Earth, with a Titan in a loincloth stopping the two from obliterating the continent.

Why? Not only because I could, but most of all because I had been told I must stay away from another hero's quest. Like stealing shit for someone else was important, and like I did care about the gods' opinion about me.

I am a free man! I thought fiercely.

So... how to force an immortal titan able to hold back two primordial forces to surrender the information I need without getting myself killed? I reasoned.

"I heard names are extra important." I started, and I saw him narrow his eyes at my deceptively cheerful tone.

Maybe I should bullshit my way through. I reasoned, and once more I asked myself if bringing around Dionysus mark had made me somehow prone to madness.

"So you can call me... mmmm." I tapped my chin "Do you have a suggestion?"

The titan blinked: "You aren't even going to put in the effort to trick me for something?" His deep voice hid wonderfully the strain he was under, but couldn't mask his incredulity.

"Hey, it's not like I'll be the one to use my fake name to refer to myself, that would be just silly, wouldn't it?" I retorted.

Atlas eyebrows narrowed: "I tire quickly of this game, mortal."

I smiled as wide as I could: "Well, that's your fucking problem isn't it?"

The titan growled, the heaviness of his intent slamming on me like the sky itself.

Too bad he cannot move. I reassured myself. "You go too far mortal, you don't know what you're bringing on yourself." his voice was even, but nevertheless it carried the weight of his presence.

Yes, Dionysus definitely made me more prone to madness. I decided.

I dropped my elbow on my knee, resting my cheek against my palm, and stared at the titan holding the sky.

"Hey, you're the one who asked for my name, I just told you to make up one for me. I know who I am, and I know who you are. So I am comfortable in my position of advantage." I kept my cheerful tone.

"Even Heracles was warier when he came." Atlas muttered, "You want me to grab an apple for you, it can be arranged, nameless, just come over here and share a bit of my burden."

At that, I laughed. I got that immortals didn't actually change, but from being encased in time to never learning anything, the stretch was ridiculous.

"That's an old trick, Atlas." I spluttered among my laughs, and yet I felt his name heavy on my tongue, there was some magic tied to it, and it was... frankly beyond me. For now.

The face of the titan turned serious: "You won't use my name with impunity, you dare too much, without knowing what it will cost you."

"I know a lot of things." I grinned smartly, before changing my pose and sitting cross-legged, my palms resting on my knees, I bent forward a bit, like I wanted to get closer: "Clymene is the daughter of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys, thus making her an Oceanid. She is the goddess of renown, fame, and infamy."

I watched as his eyes narrowed, before going on: "Iapetus is a Titan, son of Uranus..." I glanced at the impossible mass of the sky resting on Atlas' shoulders, before looking around his knee and foot: "... and Gaea, and father of Atlas, Prometheus, Epimetheus, and Menoetius."

"Iapetus' name derives from the Greek word meaning 'to pierce', usually with a spear; therefore, Iapetus may have been considered as the god of craftsmanship, although most people cite him as the god of mortality."

I tilted my head, considering carefully Atlas' unchanging expression: "Your father was also considered the personification of one of the four pillars that held the heavens and the earth apart, a role that he later bequeathed to you. He represented the pillar of the west, the other three being represented by his brothers Crius, Coeus, and Hyperion. The four brothers actively played a role in the dethroning of your dearest grandfather." I watched again at the column of the sky a few meters from me."

I rolled my shoulders to free them from the stiffness: "As your father and his brothers were all in the four corners of the earth, they held the sky firmly in place while Cronus castrated him with a sickle."

Atlas' face remained perfectly still, not betraying anything: "You and your brothers are thought to have been the ancestors of humans, and that somehow you passed your flaws

to my mortal brethren: so, although Prometheus was clever, he bequeathed scheming to mankind; Epimetheus, guileless as he was, passed down stupidity; Menoetius, an arrogant personality, bequeathed violence; and finally, you, Atlas, being powerful and patient, gave excessive daring."

I took off my sunglasses, it wasn't like I needed them, the whole place was hidden from the sun by the fucking sky itself: "So you see, I know a lot."

The titan was perfectly still, staring at me without betraying his thoughts. Seriously, I could swear that dyslexia was the gods' way to keep the demigods from learning about the world they are in. Hitting a random library would grant this info to anyone.

I smiled: "Of all the titans, you are by far one of the most interesting that I wanted to meet." And it was even the truth.

"And why is that?" Atlas looked at me.

I tilted my head again, rolling on the ground and coming to rest on my back, staring at the ominous celestial mass held back by the titan.

"Because you represent unending determination, unrelenting defiance, and acceptance of an ungrateful task for the sake of others." I started.

That surprised him, it was plain to see.

"The one that can destroy a resource, controls it. Why don't you just let go?"

"The sky must be willingly taken from me, it can't be left to fall. Otherwise, it would crush everything under its weight for thousands of kilometers in every direction, even I couldn't survive its fall. And there would be far-reaching consequences in the long term." the tenor voice of the titan rumbled again.

I narrowed my eyes and remembered some shit about the second set of Riordan's books, it was vague, but it gave me an edge.

"I take it that the sand didn't always try to climb over you to reach the sky?" I questioned with levity, ignoring the sudden heaviness of Atlas' eyes on me.

Then I grinned before smiling as wide as I could, my cheeks hurting.

"She is awaking, isn't she?" We both knew who I was referring to.

"Be quiet," Atlas ordered me.

Now that was interesting, why not? why not let the sky fall? I was reasonably sure that the multiverse theory was real, so everything that could happen happened in a different reality. So why not this?

I fingered the handle of one of the daggers on my belt. My smile turning bloodthirsty...  
"Why would you care?"

I unsheathed a dagger and rose from my seated position, taking a clue from all the shit I saw in my blurred lives, I liked the flat of the blade: "You're hardly having fun holding the sky all by your lonesome self..."

The titan looked... unsettled: "You would kill me? Why?"

I giggled: "Because I want to see what happens, why else? I'm boored."

And on the ruins of mount Othrys, Atlas, the son of Iapetus, grandson of Uranus, the Holder of the Sky, paled.

"You would cause your own death because you're bored?" he was scared or outraged, maybe both.

I was intrigued, *Immortals don't really consider self-sacrifice unless it's for something really important, do they?*

"I'm mortal, eventually I'll die anyway, and the world is honestly a dreary place. Humans actually like to think their lives have some kind of greater meaning when all goes back to doing something to prove to yourself your own existence. Even the gods die, Hell, in less than a billion years the sun will explode and engulf all the planets up to Saturn, the solar system will then crumble apart under the absence of gravity as a unifying factor and the slow entropic death of the universe..." I rolled my eyes "Besides, I think the Fates choose to give me this life as some part of a plan, and I honestly despise following other people's wishes unless there is a good reason, and the inevitability of the end of this reality denies the existence of such a reason." I concluded my nihilistic rant shrugging.

"You... could visit my daughters' garden, it's right down the side of the mountain, you can access it only at dusk, it's the most beautiful garden to ever blossom." He offered "I'm sure you've heard about the Hesperides, it would be difficult to be... bored..." I'm reasonably sure he would have shivered if the weight of the sky would have allowed it.

I huffed: "I know all about the garden and the golden apples, and Ladon, it's not like I can manage to steal a tooth from the dragon and take seventeen apples from the tree."

The titan blinked a couple of times, likely wondering about the number 17, before visibly shaking his head and wisely choosing to ignore it: "Why not facing Ladon? It would be a more interesting death than dying crushed under the sky." Atlas offered.

"Bah, being killed by a giant dragon sounds extremely boring," I tilted my head and watched again at the unending mass of clouds converging on the Titan's shoulders, it was marvelous, and I let my fascination show on my face, "At least in comparison with making the sky fall."

I walked over the Titan and trailed my fingers on the sky. It was cold, and slightly damp, and impossibly hard. I tapped it gently with my dagger, letting the surprisingly metallic 'clink' echo around.

"I wonder if there will be another generation of titans once Uranus falls on this mountain." I muttered, giggling quietly.

Then I bent over, staring unflinchingly into Atlas' eyes: "Have you ever considered how well English works as word-play with your anus and Uranus." I let the absurdity of the situation sink in.

Atlas was horrified by my blasé disregard of common decency and the value of life: "You're really planning on killing me and dying under the sky?"

I could hear... not fear, he simply could not understand how anybody, much less a mortal, could invite death on thousands of his kind because he was bored.

"I've died before." I stage whispered.

"And I am almost sure that every time I die I visit a new reality, the last one was a book I had read in the previous one." I shrugged.

"I've heard that death it's like a door." I continued conversationally, and in an act of madness, I cut away a dark curl of hair from the head of the titan holding the sky, "When one closes, another opens."

"You know, I saw people transplanting eyes somewhere..." I trailed my dagger down from the Atlas' forehead to his completely black eye. The skin splitting open in a thin line despite the exaggerated pressure I was exercising, golden ichor trailed down his cheek and reached its chin falling on the ground in a single droplet.

And the titan responsible for holding the sky was afraid.

## **Chapter 7: The power of Words**

*I trailed my dagger down from the Atlas' forehead to his completely black eye. The skin splitting open in a thin line despite the exaggerated pressure I was exercising, golden ichor trailed down his cheek and reached its chin falling on the ground in a single droplet.*

*And the titan responsible for holding the sky was afraid.*

"Don't." the titan spoke.

Pleaded.

Begged.

It was in his tone, in the way he closed his eyes as he was trying to deny my existence, his fear rippled to the air without his consent, but to me, it was unmistakable.

"Why?" I asked.

Atlas looked at me again, at loss for words, like he had difficulties in understanding me, so my smile widened: "Why shouldn't I?"

The titan licked his lips, his eyes darting around, looking for what, I had no idea, even if I could imagine he was looking for either a weapon or something to bargain.

"I can get you golden apples from the tree..." he whispered.

The gods from Olympus may have been more or less on par with the current times, they were aware of the happenings in the world, Dionysus had slipped me a list of cocktails before one of the parties I threw at the camp, and I remembered Hermes had a cellphone instead of his caduceus.

Atlas was not. And it was more than likely that neither his brothers and sisters were, or his daughters, for what mattered.

*Ignorance is the heaviest chain.* I realized dryly.

So, when I pushed Atlas into believing me, he went back to the only thing he could offer: completing Heracles' task.

"I would need to hold the sky for you, wouldn't I?" I laughed, hopping around him in an ecstatic little dance: "Yes! How fun!"

I got close to him once again, my nose less than a centimeter from his: "It could be interesting, how much does the sky weigh?"

I twirled on myself: "A man named Archimedes once said: 'Give me a place to stand and with a lever, I will move the whole world.' But the weight of the primordial you hold, it can't be measured, can it? It's immaterial, it's metaphysical!" It was a fascinating idea.

"Heracles was a powerful demigod." Atlas tried to nod, only for the ground under his knee to fissure along a thin crack: "But it was never about strength, only about will. It's always about will, strength is only a small branch of the tree."



"Now that your attention wavers the ground cracks and tries to jump beyond you!" I noted with glee, fascinating was too little a word to describe what I was looking at, and yet it made sense, Atlas passed upon men excessive daring, which was the end result of extreme self-confidence, again, something born from an indomitable will.

Atlas looked at me, unable to understand my mind, and how I could be interested in what was happening in front of me, if only because I was in a very deadly predicament.

"And it's not that you physically can't let the sky fall, it is about your pride, no scratch that. It's about your will!" I realized: "It is because you led the titans in battle in order to claim the heavens, and as such you were punished with the task of holding them!"

My mind was flying as fast as light itself: "You are proving yourself worthy of ruling the heavens by showing to *everyone* that you can hold the *weight* of the position!"

Atlas was perfectly still, neither denying nor confirming my findings, but I could tell, and I could see how his back slightly straightened, like being recognized gave him strength, but I could also tell how the slight lowering of his head showed me that he was preparing himself to be laughed at.

Like a child with a dream that he didn't dare to confess. Something that he would fight for, but that he was used to hiding it from the world, and in that moment, I *understood* Atlas.

And I was awed, among the other things, the titan was the one who had been credited with the creation of Astronomy.

I could believe that this was the one rumored to be well versed in mathematics and philosophy, instead of the two-dimensional character portrayed in Riordan's books.

"**Atlas.**" I repeated, embracing the weight of his pride, his unrelenting determination, and the strength of will that had him effectively shackled to his task.

An immortal had all the time in the world, and differently from Prometheus, he likely had the means to trick some half-god to hold the sky for him.

*His daughters are near, and so is Ladon... how long would it take for him to organize something to trick another to take his place?* I tried to put myself into his shoes.

*He led the Titans to take the Olympus.* I reasoned.

*He won't leave his position until he has a legitimate chance overthrow the current rule, his pride, his nature, his determination, his headstrong-ness, his fatal flaw, won't allow anything less.* I realized.

*He has been birthed by mankind's faith, his psychology and character had grown around a basic concept. He is defined as Strong, Willful, as an immortal with excessive daring. His personality built itself over time around those ideas.*

"When Heracles came, you took for him three apples." I resumed the previous line of thought, smiling widely.

*Immortals do not change.* I smiled widely, I had just made an extraordinary discovery that likely was true for every immortal born out of faith. Heracles, who was now an immortal god, was the same as he was when he ascended, but the path, growth, and history he had up to that moment had been his own.

"I'd like to surpass any that came before me, it sounds... *fun*." I turned my smile into a conspirational grin.

"I can hold back my boredom for a while, when I'm doing something *interesting*." I tilted my head, invading his personal space.

"Breaking Heracles' record would be exhilarating." I rolled my shoulders.

"I accept your offer, **Atlas**." and again I accepted the weight that came with his name: "I'll hold the sky, giving you enough time to grab me 6 apples, twice the number Heracles managed, and to chat with your daughters a bit. Maybe introduce me, since I'll swing by to say hi after your return."

"But be careful." My tone turned *eager* "My will is unbreakable only as long as I am interested. The moment I think I had enough, the sky *falls*."

The titan stared at me, the suspect that all my madness had been a ruse to drive him to that offer. Frankly, I wasn't sure myself, the more I thought about what had happened during our discussion, the more interested I was in watching the consequences of letting the sky fall.

"There are many aspects to willpower: determination, focus, dedication, stubbornness, self-control, discipline, bravery, selflessness, and selfishness." Atlas muttered to himself, almost as he was showing me *why* I couldn't make it.

I grinned like a loon: "I *will surpass any that came before me*." And it was a statement, like saying the 'sky is blue'. I would not be denied.

"The garden is accessible only during the sunset, I'll be as fast as I can, but during the summer the sunset can last as long as an hour and a half, are you prepared to endure?" the titan asked me, licking his lips in trepidation.

I could guess that seeing your daughters after millennia could be overwhelming.

"I am." I stated: "But I shall repeat, I get bored easily, don't make me wait, I don't know after how long the thought of seeing the sky fall will look more fascinating than surpassing those that came before me."

I straightened myself and watched west, where the sun was slowly but surely making its way towards the horizon: "After all," I kept talking, my chat with Hekate blazing into my mind: "There has never been someone like me, so my mark on this reality should be suitably unique."

"So you wish to leave a mark on this world, Nameless?" Atlas wondered, his eyes drifted to the west.

"And doing so as an Immortal, without a doubt..." he grinned a bit, believing that I was bluffing.

"Immortality is the absence of change." I cut him: "Immortality is a golden cage without walls that constricts and limits your choices. I was born free, and I'll die in the same way. The Fates are not cutting me down right now, does it mean I am fated to destroy the world? So that a new Age can be born from its ashes? Will you keep your word? Will we become friends?"

I was honestly curious about the relationship between the Fates and free will, and pondering out loud, while confirming to Atlas that *yes*, I would let the sky fall, helped me finding a sense to my existence, if it had one. *Doubtful* I scoffed.

"I will swear on the Stix." Atlas rumbled.

"Don't bother." I shook my head "A promise on the Styx is a chain, and I despise them." Besides, I knew that immortals could break their word.

"You would trust me to keep my word?" the titan was bewildered, and made me laugh.

"I know you, **Atlas**." I turned towards him, noticing that he had stopped trying to reprimand me for the constant use of his name.

"You'll get enough time to see your daughters and an occasion to stretch your legs. I'll get to experiment what holding the sky is like, I'll get to be introduced to your daughters, and six golden apples to the side." I shrugged, it looked clear enough to me.

"If the sky falls, all Olympus will fall on your back even if you manage to escape the aftermath, and you are without an army to lead." I tilted my head.

"It would be glorious... for you, I mean, going out in a blaze of glory, only to be forgotten by the next generation of titans once Uranus manages to find his virility." I pictured the absolute *new* that such a world would be and smiled again.

"Such an event would likely kickstart every apocalypse in every pantheon. Would they mesh? Or would they slide one over another, like oil and water? Such an event would be seen even by the dead, so I would still be entertained."

For me it was a win-win.

"So you aren't really trusting my word..." Atlas muttered, he sounded almost... offended? By my lack of trust, the thought made me smile devilishly.

"Ooh, don't be like that, my friend." I knelt once more in front of him, bringing my face less than a centimeter from his, finally finding the right words to express my thoughts.

"I despise chains, and you're free to do what you want, either keep your word, or don't: you know the consequences of both those courses of action."

We were very close, and when the sun touched the horizon, Atlas shrugged, and the sky landed on my shoulders.

The cold, damp clouds gave me an instant of relief before the weight settled on me.

I felt like the vertebrae in my spine were being welded together by a

blowtorch, my left knee was rammed into the ground, my kneecap screaming murder, my back folding like paper.

*No.*

I pushed back, straightening my back under the infinite weight.

I was holding pain, suffering, hopelessness, hunger, fear, tiredness.

The weight of the sky didn't have limits, and it eroded me. My consciousness swayed on the brink of the abyss, my thoughts died, my dreams and hopes crumbled, my name was forgotten.

*No.*

My arms clutched the clouds over my shoulders, grabbing them with despair evident in how blood started to seep from beneath my nails, my teeth were slammed together, making difficult for me to breath properly, my heart was thundering beyond my control.

I held the sky.

I had closed my eyes when Atlas shrugged, and from behind my eyelids, I could see that my task was doomed to fail.

I was no Heracles, no Atlas. I didn't even belong to the PJO reality, I had no purpose, no reason to exist.

I pushed back, my right foot trying to find leverage against the ground, my muscles on the verge of tearing, my bones almost snapping, my ligaments about to be shred, my soul slowly crumbling over the colossal mistake that my pride had led me to make.

*No.*

I refused to stop pushing back. Like hell I was going to let a tiny thing like the sky kill me. I didn't know if it was possible, but I *held back* the sky. I had willingly taken it, and I would carry through my promise to Atlas.

I would hold the sky until he was back.

Or until I became bored.

And the mad-me that I had pretended to be during my chat with Atlas raised his head, grinning madly in my thoughts.

*What if you drop it?*

I couldn't not think about it.

Holding the sky was... there weren't words. Painful, yes, beyond whatever mortal could accomplish, sure.

Grating.

Annihilating.

My bones were ground together, my thoughts slowly slurring one against another like they were moving in molten tar, there was only one task, one purpose, one duty.

I pushed.

The sky would not fall.

Time had lost any meaning, and I too, had lost any sense of self, I was crumbling into nothingness, why did I have to suffer? I could just let go...

*No.*

I gritted my teeth, feeling the tang, metallic taste of blood on my tongue, and I was too far gone to feel any discomfort caused by the sweat coursing from my forehead over to my nose, on the point of which it formed droplets that fell on the ground.

Beyond the agonizing effort, I could feel my bones trembling, my muscles had forgotten what not being contracted meant, my breath was coming in ragged rasps, my lungs aching for more air, for less work, for an *end* to come. My heart was fluttering, blood madly rushing through my veins, washing away cramps that reformed immediately after, but the pain they caused was almost a relief over the white noise of *sheer agony* that I was suffering.

I just wanted for it to end, why would I care about anything else?

The sky started digging into my back. *No*.

I denied it. I was holding it, and it would stay above my shoulders. I pushed like I had never been doing anything else, and for all I knew, all my existence had been pain and the slow eroding of my sense of self, but *that*, that was unforgivable.

*My name is Icarus*. I remembered.

I was holding the sky, but thinking it wasn't enough. I had to declare it.

Holding the sky was *nothing*. I would do much more, *be* much more, and I would not go quietly in the night after completing what the Fates wanted from me, nor I would be nailed down by the weight of the sky.

"My name is Icarus." I repeated, my voice steady through my rasping breaths, and I opened my eyes in time to see the sunlight dropping behind the horizon, tossing the world into the night.

"My name is Icarus." I said once more: "**And I am free.**"

The sky stood uncomfortably over my shoulders, his pressure not lessening, but I was holding it back. I would not be crushed.

My red-rimmed eyes finally managed to focus on what was happening around me, and my bleary vision made out a humanoid figure looming over me.

Atlas dropped a jute sack on the side of the small plateau, a branch tied to it like a classic cartoon vagabond had used it to pack his things.

He didn't come closer.

I chuckled among my heavy breaths. My body was still trying to give up, but 'mind over matter' became much more real in a world of gods and titans. So I endured.

"I'm not done." I warned Atlas off, I wasn't done playing with the sky.

"How are your daughters?" I asked after a while. The sky was heavy, its willingness to crush me, and whatever was around hadn't abated in the slightest, however, I had

reforged my will to endure it. And everything I was had as a fulcrum myself being **free**. So, simply as that, while I found in myself the strength of will to 'not-fold', I wouldn't.

"Surprised to see me, few manage to reach Otri without crossing their garden." The titan tilted his head, looking at me with something akin to respect: "And curious to meet you, if I have to be honest."

"So you *did* tell them about me." I uttered a rasping laugh.

"I don't know your name, so I couldn't introduce you." the titan grumbled in distaste: even if he had no fault, he disliked not completing every aspect of the pact we had struck: "Are your curiosity and boredom sated now?"

"Did I hold the sky for longer than Hercules?" I asked back, minutely tilting my shoulders to try and alleviate a sudden cramp. I blessed the new pain that allowed me to *not think* about the disastrous state my body was likely in. More than a half-god or not, I sure as hell wasn't built for the kind of effort I was forcing myself through.

"Not yet." he shook his head.

I pushed back the sky, its will trying to squash me. But it couldn't. I knew who I was, and I wouldn't fade because of a dickless primordial.

"Stories credited you with the invention of astronomy." I said, my voice surprisingly even given the effort I was putting in not-dying.

Atlas answered to my unspoken question: "They are true: where my brother birthed the sun, the dawn and the moon, I invented the first celestial sphere."

I rolled his shoulders, likely marveling at the feeling of lightness and freedom that was so uncommon to him.

His voice had turned wistful, and he was staring upwards, towards the starry sky only partially obscured by the column of clouds resting on my shoulders.

My ears managed to pick up a few words out of his half-whispered grumbling: "... Orion... lots to answer for..."

And my mind shot through all the stories I knew about Orion, suddenly remembering that the seven Pleyads were Atlas' daughters, and they had been chased by Orion, who had also dared to attack their mother, before being turned into doves and then stars by Zeus, so that they could comfort Atlas while he held up the sky, while being safe from the titan, whom still chased them in the sky.

Once more I wondered what the immortals saw when looking at the world, if they could distinguish between the myths they were a part of and the reality mankind had built them from.

"Beer dulls a memory, brand sets it burning, but wine is the best for a sore heart's yearning." I repeated Dionysus words: "There is a leather canteen that won't run out of wine in my backpack." I tilted my head indicating the backpack that I had dropped when I had reached the top of Mont Talampais.

At the titan questioning glance, I tried to shrug, only for the sky to remind me that I couldn't.

"A mortal poet named Hesiod once wrote:

And if longing seizes you for sailing the stormy seas,

when the Pleiades flee mighty Orion

and plunge into the misty deep

and all the gusty winds are raging,

then do not keep your ship on the wine-dark sea

but, as I bid you, remember to work the land."

Without uttering a word, Atlas walked toward my backpack and dug out my canteen, uncorking it and taking long sips. The titan walked back to me and sat down, leaning backwards until he rested on his elbows, free to drink while looking at the stars.

"You know a lot of things for a demigod." he grumbled.

"Talk with me, **Atlas**, the longer you hold my interest, the more you can rest." I reminded him of our respective positions.

"What do you know about my daughters that live in the garden?" he tilted his head, without stopping his stargazing.

I grunted, I may have found a way to not crumble under the sky, but I was far from comfortable, and far from being able to tell a story. The dry chuckle of the titan of strength, endurance, and astronomy told me that he knew it perfectly.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to recount the words that flashed in my mind: "Far on the sloping margin of the western sea sinking Helios had unyoked his flaming steeds, and laved their bright manes in the springs of Oceanus . . . and the swift-striding Hours, who strip him of his reins and the woven glory of his golden coronet, and relive his horse's dripping breasts of the hot harness; some turn the well-deserving steeds into the soft pasture, and lean the chariot backward, pole in air."

The titan let out a deep breath: "Hesperis, the Hour of the evening." he took several gulps of the wine: "She was beautiful and fleeting, with her yellow dress..."



"My daughters remind me of her, thank you for giving me time to talk with them." Atlas reminisced with a wry smile, and I would never again doubt Dionysus power. That wine had turned him into a sappy titan!

"What are their names?" I asked between my deep breaths. The sky tried to crush me in the moment I had lowered my guard, but I ruthlessly squashed its chance. *I will not bow.*

"Chrysothemis, the Golden law, Asterope, the Starry-faced, Hygieia, and Lipara, the Rich land. It hurt me discovering that one of them betrayed her family, forsaking her own name..." He shook his head.

After a while, his eyes left the east and he was looking somewhere else: "Pleione lived in a southern region of Greece, the mortals of the time called it Arcadia, on a mountain named Kyllini. Mortals used to pray her and make offerings because she had a soft spot for sailors, she called them brave, because they sailed in the night with nothing but their hearts to guide them. With her, I had the Hyades, Hyas, and the Pleiades."

He took several gulps of the wine, a lone tear trailing down his cheek.

"When Hyas died, killed by his own prey, the proud fool, his sisters cried themselves to death. The King placed the Hyades in a cluster on the Taurus constellation, so that at least at night, I can see some of my daughters."

*Immortals do not change.* I reminded myself, finding that the pain of the ancient being at my side was as raw as it was when the facts happened, millennia before, and that in a twisted way, Atlas respected Zeus, if only because he granted him the possibility to glance upon his daughters.

Time had lost again any meaning during his talking, and so I was extremely surprised when the sky tinted itself pink in the east.

I endured. I would surpass Heracles, freeing myself from the usual aims and limits of a common demigod.

Atlas let out a deep belly laugh, corking my leather canteen and coming close to me: "Now you have surpassed Heracles."

He didn't ask for the sky, he didn't need to, because I managed to force my way through those last agonizing moments, feeling like the sky wanted nothing more than crushing me when I was done because of my impudence. With a familiarity that I wished on nobody, Atlas freed me from my burden.

I shrugged off the weight and fell forward, effectively slamming my face on the ground.

While I passed out, I could hear the deep rumble of Atlas' laugh.

16 July 2000

When the sun touched the horizon, there was a sudden thickening of the Mist all around me, making it more solid, like a curtain. I pushed it aside and crossed it.

When the fog cleared, I was still on the side of the mountain, but the road was dirt covered in thick, lush grass. The sunset made a bloodred slash across the sea. The summit of the mountain seemed closer now, swirling with storm clouds and raw power, Mount Otri looked suddenly... bigger. And the path to the top, which I knew and I had already walked multiple times, was suddenly leading through a lush meadow of shadows and flowers: the garden of twilight.

I eyed the rest of the downhill park with curiosity, it looked more or less the same, while the path going towards the top went through a terrain that clearly wasn't there before.

I ducked under a branch and crossed the meadow, it looked interesting. I walked slowly, relying on the long branch that Atlas had ripped from the golden apple tree. It was a sturdy, straight piece of wood, And I had sweated seven bucks to prune it, stashing in my backpack all the wood and leaves that I divested it of, one could never know when a magical piece of wood could be useful.

The garden was vast and bountiful. The grass itself was lush and vibrating with life. It took me exactly four seconds to take off my shoes and going barefoot across the sea of green. The light breeze made every single blade of grass dance, bringing forth the sweet smell of more flowers that I couldn't either hope to count or recognize.

Beyond flowers littering the grass, and the bushes of roses and whatnot, the trees were outstanding. Their presence was unmistakably magical, but it was far from the dangerous vibe of the forest I grew up in, the magic permeating the air was... *tame*.

It was obvious, from the fluvial stones drawing paths across the garden, that a lot of work had been put in keeping this place cared for. There was an absolute absence of irrigators, meaning that every single flowerbed was cared for individually.

If it hadn't been for the enormous dragon, the garden would've been the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. The grass shimmered with silvery evening light, and the flowers were such brilliant colors they almost glowed in the twilight. Stepping stones of polished black marble led around either side of a five-story-tall apple tree, every bough glittering with golden apples.

As soon as I smelled their fragrance, I knew that one bite would be the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted.

I wanted to step right up and pluck one, except for the dragon coiled around the tree.

Now, I don't know what you think of when I say dragon. Whatever it is, it's not scary enough. The serpent's body was as thick as a booster rocket, glinting with coppery

scales. He had more heads than I could count, as if a hundred deadly pythons had been fused together.

He appeared to be asleep. The heads lay curled in a big spaghetti-like mound on the grass, all the eyes closed.

Then the shadows in front of me began to move. There was a beautiful, eerie singing, like voices from the bottom of a well.

Four figures shimmered into existence, four young women, all wearing white Greek chitons. Their skin was like caramel. Silky black hair tumbled loose around their shoulders. They were gorgeous, and, like their father could be, very dangerous.

"What are you doing in our garden mortal?" asked one.

I raised an eyebrow: "You mean Queen Hera's garden, don't you?"

I wasn't sure, but the slight darkening of her cheeks told me she was embarrassed by my answer.

"Answer her question!" Thundered another, even if her voice was more like the sweetness of honey than the rumble of thunder. She expected to be obeyed, and so I acquiesced her request.

"Taking a stroll." I grinned: "And Atlas told the truth, her daughters truly are more beautiful than the sunset they incarnate." I dipped my head slowly.

"Do not lie!" Hissed the third: "We can tell someone has been sent to steal from us."

"Well, it's not really my quest, and I don't really care about immortality right now, I'd prefer to hit 25 or something like that before stopping aging." I shrugged, acutely conscious of the sack on my shoulders: "And again, you are only caretakers of the Garden, it's not yours, so I would be stealing from the queen."

Number Three hissed in displeasure, her cheeks darkening like her first sister's ones.

"Then why would you come here?" The fourth asked quietly.

"I wanted to chat with Atlas, to hear if the stories were true." I answered.

When they stared impassively at me, I grinned mischievously.

"Honestly, I also wanted to meet the fabled nymphs of the sunset." And I lifted the canteen I had strapped at my waist: "I brought wine, and I thought we could have fun, you must have missed a lot of things, being cooped here for thousands of years."

"I don't believe you." Said one.

"Like all the others, you want to steal a golden apple." Said another.

I snorted: "I know Ladon dearest has been put here by the Queen of the gods in order to keep *you* from stealing apples."

I grinned, and sat down in the clearing: "I hoped to find a way to relieve some of your boredom."

"So you are here as a vanguard, to clean the way to other silly demigods?" One asked.

"Fools that dare attempt to take what cannot be taken by mortal hand?" asked another.

The third one simply gazed at me with eyes that spoke of nightshade, of dusk, of the end of the domain of men. There was something... in her posture, I decided. She was less guarded, likely because she believed Ladon would eat me sooner or later, or because she had caught on what my presence there meant.

I reached inside my pocket and took out a single golden apple, feeling it thrumming with *everything*, whispering promises to my senses, singing to my blood, begging to be eaten.

My mind cut through the compulsion, rooting myself into place, and I turned to watch the Hesperids, finding tiny differences among them and trying to figure out who was who.

Chrysothemis, was likely the most stuck up of the four, Asterope was the one on my left, given how her face seemed to almost sparkle, Hygieia on my right, and Lipara was the one closest to me, given that her hips looked slightly larger than her sisters'.

"I held the sky while your father came here, I'm very sore, I thought we could relax together, and share this beauty." even if I had no intention of eating it, it was too soon for me to tackle immortality.

And just like that, it was like I had flipped a switch, their animosity vanished, and their eyes turned hungry.

"You held the sky for all that time?"

"You are very strong for a mortal."

"It's been a long time since we last talked with father."

"There is a pond where we can wash your tiredness away."

At the end of the day, I had left Half Blood camp in order to spite Luke and complete his quest before him. I had succeeded, only having to channel my inner Heat Ledger Joker and hold up the sky for a whole night.

Even if I did it more because I could than for any kind of actual necessity.

At this point, like hell I wasn't trying to bang the nymhs.

## **Chapter 8: Another Task**

21 July 2000

I had never been very self conscious, but even if I had been, such a character flaw would have been literally stripped away from me very fast.

Four days of heaven. That was the only way I could use to describe what had happened to me. I felt the tyrsus disguised as a cork necklace rest heavy on my chest, it was my only item of clothing, and thanks to that, Dionysus had become my favourite deity.

Seconds didn't pass in the garden, it was always dusk, and I measured time through the cycles of hunger and 'sleep' with the Hesperids.

Or, I would have, if I hadn't drunk myself into a stupor with the immortal beauties whom I had gifted an apple to. I fed on fruits and beauty, bathing in a warm natural source of water and rolling with them over the lush grass.

I had left my clothes with my backpack and the pruned branch of the Golden Apple Tree near the hedges, some part of my mind knew that I could leave the garden only at dusk. But the dusk of the mortal world wasn't something I could be aware of while staying in the garden. Frankly, I knew that Thalia and Luke were to arrive sooner or later, and so I had enjoyed my vacation.

They would arrive in four days. For me, time had lost any meaning, it felt like weeks had passed since I held the sky, and I remember seeing Chrysothemis pruning hedges and trees, Asterope giving new life to the plants that dared shine a tiny bit less than they could.

There was a subtle song going around, made of whispers and promises and shifting colors and stretching shadows. It was the voice of the garden itself, no scratch that, it was the voice of the magic permeating the air, of the intent of the Hesperids of taking care of it.

Hygieia enjoyed plucking the fruits from trees or bushes, we dined on them, feeding each other, while Lipara was the one to plant new flowers. From where she took the seeds, I had no idea.

I had seen each of them occasionally sing to Ladon, to keep him appeased, even if he looked nervous anytime they came too close. And by nervous, I meant that more than half of his heads were awake and looking around.

It had the effect of making *me* nervous. A lot. Ladon was the unholy son of Typhon and Echidna, and it was a being of nightmares. I stood as far from the tree as I could, and I fuzzily remember the nymphs of sunset laughing at me. I remember laughing too.

After ages, or barely a few hours since I started drinking with them, I felt something at the edges of my memory. I opened my eyes and saw trees stretched against the eternal dusk.

But while the sky felt *right*, a part of me recognized that it had no right to be, something was amiss. I missed seeing the moon, and Atlas' daughters deserved at least a casual 'hello'. With the stars hidden, I simply couldn't.

The tall and lush grass was all around me, while a few feet away Liparia was resting, her naked body loosely splayed in sleep.

She looked smooth and perfect as a sculpture. She sighed in her sleep, and I chided myself for the thought. I knew she was nothing like cold stone. She was warm and supple, the smoothest marble grindstone by comparison, and the caramel color of her skin was of a beauty beyond human.

I blinked. *Beyond human*. I repeated the thought to myself, and I started recollecting the strands of my psyche.

My hand reached out to touch her, but I stopped myself, not wanting to disturb the perfect scene before me and being grateful for every second that I could dedicate to find again my thoughts.

In my pride and carelessness, I had forgotten an old truth: Do not trust the appearances.

Yes, the Hesperids were beautiful and harmless, Ladon would kill only those who dared take from the tree, there were no poisons in the air or in the water, the wine was a gift from Dionysus... in other words, there were no direct threats to my life.

*And like an idiot I didn't consider that everything can potentially kill me.* I realized.

It was understandable, I had been on a high since holding the sky...

*...holding the sky? What the fuck?*

My mind was in disarray, I couldn't exactly remember... *Icarus, my name is Icarus.*

My thoughts slowly regained their previous sharpness.

Lipari's lips parted and sighed, making a sound like a dove. I remembered the touch of those lips. I ached, and forced myself to look away from her soft, flower-petal mouth.

Her closed eyelids were patterned like a butterfly's wings, swept in whorls of deep purple and black with traceries of pale gold that blended to the caramel color of her skin. The shadows on her features were soft like velvet, promising rest, reminding me that she wasn't human. As her eyes moved gently in sleep, the shadowy pattern shifted, as if the butterfly fanned its wings.

I ate her with my eyes, knowing that I should quit while I was ahead.

Something in my mind screamed at me, but I was bemused by the motion of her eyes beneath her lids, the shape her mouth made, as if she would kiss me even while she slept.

I was going to go mad, or die.

The idea finally fought its way through to my conscious mind, and I felt every hair on my body stand suddenly on end. I had a moment of perfect, clear lucidity that resembled coming up for air and quickly closed my eyes.

I had seen immortals before, I had seen her and her sisters as soon as I stepped into Hera's garden, and my mind didn't fall under the captivating appearances.

But it wasn't that, or better, not just that. I was seeing *more*. *The four Hesperids didn't look so captivating before our shared edonism...*

Behind my eyes, the Hesperid distracted me. The sweet breath. The soft breast. The urgent half-despairing sighs that slipped through hungry, petal-tender lips..

I don't doubt for a second that it had, quite naturally, deprived men of their faculties in the past. I, however, knew myself to be quite sane. Or at the very least, I knew that I was the only one to direct my thoughts. Madness had come to play with me with my chat with Atlas, I had started pretending, but soon I had found myself ensnared in my own web. It was something worthy of future investigation.

I briefly entertained the notion that I was insane and didn't know it. Then I considered the possibility that I had always been insane, acknowledged it as more likely than the former, then pushed both thoughts from my mind, reminding to myself that until my madness brought me to try to fly into the fucking sun with wings made of wax, I could deal with it.

But why did my mind return to me only in that moment? Why not before? Why not later? Then I felt it, a subtle shift in the air, a ripple in the magic of the garden, a change in the quality of the light I had grown used to.

Lipari's light frown made clear that she felt the same. I looked around, taking notice of the passed out nymphs around me while I rose from the ground and walked away.

*Dionysus, thank you.* I was grateful, for the wine, over which I had bonded with Atlas and thanks to which I had disabled the first alarm system of the garden. I was thankful because of the slight madness that had allowed me to accomplish great things like holding the sky and shagging four nymphs.

I had the feeling I had forgotten something, but it didn't come to mind, and I knew that trying to remember wouldn't make it come up any time sooner. I shrugged, *What will be, will be.* I thought briefly.

I didn't know how did I manage to be so attuned to the magic in the garden, either because of my blood, for the long period of time that I had spent in there, for what I had shared with the nymphs, but what I had felt the first time I walked on the lush, magic grass, paled in comparison to what I was able to understand now.

I could feel the constant breathing of the plants and the ever working fatigue of their roots, my eyes naturally landed on the ripest fruit. In the same ethereal, not explainable, complex, mysterious way, now that I had somehow regained all of my faculties, the sky unnerved me.

I didn't feel exceedingly powerful, or suddenly donned with a new undeniable right to rewrite the laws of reality, I was still myself, only... more aware.

The celestial sphere went from the golden pink of the west to the dark purple of the east, the shades were undeniably beautiful, even charming, but I wanted to see the sky that I had held, not a single state of it.

Suddenly, I came to realize that I was in a cage, one without walls, without bars, and worst of all: without reasons to leave.

*But I have to.* I reminded myself. I didn't need to leave. *I want to.* The world was big and mysterious, things to see, things to do, knowledge to steal, to earn, battles to be fought, enemies to be turned into friends, friends to turn into brothers, fates to break, gods and immortals to annoy.

**"I am free."** I whispered to myself what I realized was my first truth, my first commandment, the first brick of the foundation that was my identity.

Whatever half wish to stay back with Lipari, Hygieia, Chrysothemis and Asterope whitered away in my mind. I regained control of my thoughts and walked away from the sleeping nymphs, wary of waking them.

I shook my head, my memories were slow to return, and with a grimace I remembered offering my only apple to the nymphs in order to... well, it had been a blatant conversation starter to reach the manly purpose of having sex. I was... conflicted.



I wasn't exactly hating my lust, since I didn't regret what was likely the best experience of my life so far, but Hades, maybe I could have kept for my lonesome self a single slice?

*No use thinking about it now.* I reminded myself, walking toward the disturbance I had felt at the edges of my perception.

I ducked under branches and weaved through flowerbeds, ignoring the path made of flat fluvial stones. I didn't wrap myself in Mist, it was unnecessary, the garden knew me and somehow it acquiesced my need for being unseen, likely knowing that I wasn't sneaking around in order to steal.

*It says something about my life that I manage to think that a garden knows my intentions with a straight face.* I noted dryly.

After several minutes, I reached the origin of the disturbance, and seeing the cause, I let out the breath I had been holding and stepped out from among the trees a big grin plastered on my face.

"Icarus!" Thalia called me first.

I waved my hand: "Yo!"

"You're here! Why would you be here?" Luke sounded tired.

"You're naked!" Thalia accused me at the same time.

"Oh, yeah, that too."

"Put something on!" she ordered me, blushing scarlet, but I noticed that she didn't turn around and kept looking at me.

I nodded, recognizing the validity of her request, and walked to the hedge, finding the bundle of clothes that I had thoughtfully left near the exit.

*Where are my backpack and the pruned branch of the tree?* I frowned, something was itching at the edge of my thoughts. I remembered working on the wood, and I remembered using it as a aid to walk after the crucible that holding the sky had been.

I scratched my head while looking around. *Maybe is near another part of the hedge?* I wondered and started walking clockwise, my eyes scanning my surroundings.

A hand clamped on my shoulder: "What. Are. You. Doing. Here?" Luke bit out, Thalia was looking at me expectantly.

"Looking for my stuff." I answered blankly.

"So you didn't somehow find a way to precede us to the location where we have to complete our quest?" Thalia sounded sarcastic.

"Luke's quest." I answered without thinking about it. *Courious, the hedges behave almost like smoke. I wonder, if I hop through will I find myself in the Mount Talampais Reserve?*

I kept walking, the other two demigods following me: "Well, I clearly won the race to this place, but like Luke loves repeating, it's your quest, I wasn't invited, was I?"

The son of Hermes snarled something and stomped into the garden, his eyes blind to the beauty of the place, leaving Thalia alone to deal with my passive-aggressive snark.

"So you're not helping us?" She asked sardonically.

She already knew my answer, and that helping wasn't the point.

"I hope Luke has enough sense as to not awaken anybody, the nymphs are KO, so they won't rise the alarm, but dragging on yourself the ire of the dragon is suicide." I continued walking, sad for the absence of the branch, which was arguably a priceless treasure almost on par with the apples.

"It's not our first rodeo, you know." She rolled her eyes: "What are you looking for?"

"My stuff." I answered non committally.

"And why should your stuff be along the edge of the Garden? No, scratch that, why were you naked in the first place?"

I knowingly ignored her question and she smacked my head. Not happy with the result, she zapped me.

"Oi!" I protested "Why would you do that?!"

"Because you disappeared without saying anything to anyone, dumbass! And don't ignore my question!" her tone had turned somewhat steely, and I felt her trying to exercise some kind of *authority* over me. I looked at her with a raised eyebrow, noticing that she hadn't even done it on purpose, and my mind shrugged off her command effortlessly. *I am free.*

"I K. the nymphs." I answered, letting her find her own answers.

Since I was still walking the edge of the Garden and I wasn't looking at her, I couldn't see her expression. Even so, her baffled face made a clear jump to the forefront of my mind. I could almost see her brain trying to link KO nymphs with my being naked, and failing at it repeatedly.

Then in her head it *clicked*, and she was reduced to a spluttering mess for a couple of seconds, before pulling herself back together: "Yes, comic relief so harsh that has them laughing into unconsciousness." she tried to tease me.

"I saw you staring before, trying to downplay your reaction is futile..." I teased over my shoulder, ready to give up my search.

I earned myself another zap. "Yow! Fucking Hades, Sparkles, contain your lust!"

I had turned to face her by then, with a playful smirk on my face and the admittedly inflated ego of a sixteen years old who had just finished a 4 days long sex marathon (even if I was counting the numerous occasions in which I remembered doing other stuff in it).

Before she could school the blushing outrage that proudly danced on her face, a nightmarish choir of horror cut whatever levity we were having.

## **GROOKKRAGRORR**

It wasn't a roar, oh no, neither a thunder or a rockslide. It wasn't even an earthquake, Hades, I was dreaming of hurricanes and tsunami. But the reality was much worse.

The ground shook and the air thundered, suddenly turning heavy and oppressive, above the canopy of the garden, I saw a flowing glint of scales, my ears too busy with the chours of hissing rumbling to hear what Thalia was saying.

Ladon sounded pissed. Or just awake: it was a horrible situation either way.

Thalia and I shot through the well cared for trees and flowerpots, our feet skipping us from a flat stone to another in order to not waste momentum against the slightly damp ground. My hand instinctively brought out the dagger that I had used to freak out Atlas from the sheat where it was secured.

Thalia's shield blared to life and her spear was crackling with the promise of lightning by the time we reached the center of the garden. The tree stood uncaringly, the wound caused by the relatively small branch Atlas had ripped away was still glistening with golden resin, and I distractedly wondered if it was akin to ichor.

On the other side of the clearing, Lipari, Hygieia, Chrysothemis and Asterope were standing with expression that cycled from outraged to amused. Thankfully, they were dressed, and as such I managed to bring my eyes back to the more important detail of Luke giving proof of his extraordinary prowess in *dodging*. His sword flashed from time to time, but only to redirect a bite.

It was extraordinary, the sheer momentum the son of Hermes was keeping up to be able to do so had to be staggering, coupled with the speed through which he kept rolling, jumping running and sweeping, it was beyond what I ever imagined him capable of.

The worrying part, was that neither Thalia nor I were the kind of fighter that never got hit. She with her shield, and I with my stubbornness, we both used tanking the enemy's blows as an opening, and from how she was grinding her teeth together, she realized it immediately.

My knife was returned to its sheath and the Mist rolled over the monster who was still sporting several bruises and cuts gifted to him by Atlas.

*Say what you want, but the old fucker hits the hardest.* I grinned, recognizing the might of my... acquaintance.

Soon enough, incorporeal images of Luke started to weave their way through each other, the original son of Hermes, and the heads of Ladon.

Following my lead, Thalia had turned her attention to the sky, which had clouded, despite the constant that was the eternal dusk we were fighting in.

"We need to leave before the sunset outside ends, or we'll be trapped with four pissed nymphs and the most horrible thing since Steve Buscemi." I rattled off to Thalia, referring to Ladon. She took a moment to consciously ignore the comparison before sighing in agreement.

"Our plan was a dash and run either way." She muttered.

Random sounds of things that weren't there started echoing across the clearing, courtesy of one of my newest tricks, while I bit down on my tongue to avoid cursing the sheer stupidity of them both.

Feeling my discomfort and sheer disgust, she amended: "Well, my plan to shoot an arrow to rip an apple off was discarded for whatever reason."

"Apples explode when hit by an arrow." I deadpanned. *Unless this world is a crossover with Robin Hood: Men in Tights.*

The sudden lightning blinded me for a moment and then the thunder drowned Thalia's answer. If not for her blush, I would have deemed the timing a coincidence.

"Luke!" She shouted as soon as the thunder faded, "We need to run, we'll try again, but we need to go!"

That had the unfortunate consequence of placing us in the same league of the thief in the eyes of Ladon.

While its serpentine body was still coiled around the trunk of the apple tree, its heads were placed on top of very long and strong necks, and as such both me and Thalia had to throw ourselves aside when like twenty deadly dragon heads started biting off the ground where we had stood not a second before.

We ran around the clearing, mirroring each other, Thalia using her shield to great effect to stall the beast when it came too close, and I weaving illusions to take my place while my body turned invisible. Somehow, at least five of Ladon's heads kept following me around, if because of luck or because they knew my general position, I didn't know.

Somehow, in all the madness that an enraged Ladon *was*, we managed to regroup at the edge of the clearing.

Unfortunately, we were still in range of the scaly motherfucker, who fell on us like a landslide.

I jumped over a head that had lunged to eat me holding my breath, avoiding the poisonous exhalations from the deadly mouths eager to swallow me whole while I slid under another, the sheer terror I was feeling battling with the exhilaration that simply staying alive was filling me with.

My knife had been tailor made by the Aephestus' kids: I had no idea how, but they had managed to make blend of steel and celestial bronze, and while its effectiveness against monsters was greatly reduced, I could use it to skin the animals I occasionally hunted in the forest around my secret lair. It had a saw section on the edge, a long blade and a curved point. A glorified butcher's knife, nothing more, but it could cut small branches as well as ropes. It was a multi purpose knife, and in the madness that I was experimenting, I found out that it could penetrate wonderfully between a scale and the next, briefly giving me an anchor of sorts on a neck that I found myself riding.

I dodged, spun and jumped. I pushed off Luke that used the momentum I gave him to bury his word into a gleaming, hungry eye, causing the head holding it to reel back in pain, effectively stopping several other heads from swarming us.

Academically, I knew that Ladon had one hundred heads and that there was no way in hell they could all fit around us, since each one was at least as big as a minivan.

And yet at least 85% of his heads fit perfectly around us.

Thalia managed to occasionally stall a single head with her shield, while her spear kept calling on lightnings that she freely shared with the scaly motherfucker intent on killing us. Luke and I were more or less accessories to her awesomeness, even in those moments, I could recognize it without shame.

My tricks with the Mist were useful, but they were just that, tricks, and Luke was noticeably slower than before: he was starting to grow tired. Thalia was the one doing the lion's share of the 'keeping us alive': both attracting Ladon's attention and proving herself tough enough to require several dozen heads to work together.

Our fight for survival found a balance of sorts, with Luke and I supporting the daughter of Zeus, who started to call the shots: "Let's retreat, but keep your backs toward the edge of the clearing!"

There was neither time nor reason to discuss her orders, so we started retreating, flashes of lightning and Thalia's shield as our cover.

I was focused on avoiding dying, so my eyes couldn't follow the other two demigods' movements, but suddenly, I heard a *slam*. Luke was hurled over my head and slammed against a tree.

"Luke!" Thalia called, but there was no answer. *At least he was tossed in the right direction.* I considered.

I managed to find a way back to the slumped body of the demigod, accurately avoiding the several extremely deadly attacks of Ladon. Could I have punched the dragon with the same strength that allowed me to hold the sky? Maybe. But a life and death situation wasn't the place to experiment with the possible applications of my newfound *will*. In any case, I doubted it: holding the sky had been a confrontation between my identity and the latent desire of Ouranos. My will had overcome, for a time, the distracted, half-hearted wish of the sky to fall. Punching had nothing to do with testing my will, and as such, I would probably only end up hurting myself.

*Or I could pull a Nepero from HunterXHunter...* My mind distractedly offered while I took the unconscious form of Luke over my shoulders.

"Thalia! We need to..." I started to call her back when...

## **KRABOOM**

Like when we first arrived at the camp half blood, the world had gone white for an instant before my ears started hating me.

This time however, I wasn't facing Thalia when she broke the sky apart, thusly keeping my sight. A tug on my shoulder later, I found myself running at her side towards the black marble path that led to our exit.

For roughly two minutes, we half dragged, half pushed ourselves: Thalia busy covering our asses with a veritable lightning storm I wasn't aware she could summon, I busy holding Luke and twisting the Mist in order to confound Ladon as much as I could.

By then, I was dead on my feet, and I could barely recognize the patch of grass in front of me from the one behind, but Thalia must have kept us in the right direction, because soon enough, the air lost its shimmer, the grass stopped singing, the leaves stopped whispering, and the world felt... dimmer.

My heart clenched in sorrow at the loss, before my mind actually started working again and I slumped in relief. I let Luke fall down from my shoulders and started looking around, noticing with mild surprise that we were close to one of touristic point of access of the Mount Tamalpais State Park, just behind a few trees, a position secluded enough to not grab the attention of a tourist.

I eyed my rescuers-companions critically, ascertaining their wounds. I hoped to find none.

Luke was still K.O., but beyond a bump on his head, he looked fine, he wasn't pale nor he was losing blood, so it was fine. Thalia was panting, her back against a trunk, her shield folded back and her collapsible spear held tight in her right hand, her black hair slick with sweat, a bloodied grin on her face...

*Bloodied?* I stopped, paling dramatically when she spat a glob of blood on the side.

"Shit." she cursed, while I ran at her side: inspecting her closely. The only open wound that I could spot was a deep gnash on her right thigh, sign of her only mistake. *But why is she spitting blood then?*

"Don't go all mother hen on me, it's only a scratch." She protested against my examination, opening a leather pouch and popping down an ambrosia cube.

"Thalia, why the fuck would you spit blood if the wound is on your leg?" She wasn't taking notice of the situation's seriousness.

"It was the side of the tooth, he didn't manage to bite me, only cut with the unbelievably sharp side of the fang." She rolled her eyes: "And another head skull bashed me, nothing to worry about."

*Spitting blood is plenty to worry about.* I tied quickly a bandage on her most greivous wound, and without further fanfare, I checked again Luke, who was still busy enjoying Morpheus' realm.

Thalia passed me a small vial of nectar, that I forced him to swallow, massaging his neck to make sure he would not suffocate: "Why do you think he charged without thinking?" I asked Thalia, who shrugged, busy trying to stand.

"He needs to grow up." she replied almost grimly, and then, she chose that exact moment to fall back to the ground, her eyes fluttering, like she was trying to force them open.

I flung myself to her side holding her head while I checked for other injuries: "Thalia? What happened!?" I touched her forehead and bristled when I felt it burning with fever. Caught by a sudden doubt, I undid the bandage on her leg, finding it sizzling.

"One hundred venomous heads of dragon, obviously." I breathed out.

Exactly when I had started to relax, everything went to shit. *Classic.*

## Chapter 9: Warnings and Bargains

21 July 2000

*First-class is bullshit.* I thought distractedly, running my hand over the velvet-like seat before changing the wet cloth on Thalia's forehead.

The Mist was awesome: tossing Luke and Thalia on a taxi for the airport had been almost a trivial task, and bringing them on the first flight to NY ridiculously easy. I wrapped us, demigods, into my classic invisibility shell, my standard move while traveling, and approached the first pompous captain I had spotted walking around. Making him believe that he was an aviator and that I was his direct superior had been tricky, but far from ineffective. With Thalia on a wheelchair and Luke still lunged over my shoulders, I followed the man bypassing hours of documents-check and whatnot, essentially walking the corridors reserved to the personnel, occasionally swapping my Mist induced control over someone else.

From start to finish? It took me fifteen minutes to reach the airplane, two to make sure that three mortals left us their passports and tickets, another three to make those who checked our identities believe that both Thalia and Luke were conscious and that our faces matched the IDs. It was a novel application of my mastery over the Mist, but not too different from what I used to do as a kid to make people believe I had already paid them.

The flight should have lasted between 5 and 6 hours, however, the captain informed us that we picked an unexpected contrary wind, so the flight would likely last at least 7. Saying that I disliked Zeus was an understatement.

"What... what happened?" Luke awoke with a groan, just in time for me to clean his clock with a punch to the face.

I understood him, I truly did. He had some crush for Thalia, but she liked me, it was hard to miss, *Even if I notice only because of how Thalia has ogled my bare ass.* That did not help against his blatant inferiority complex, which had made him snap at the worst possible moment.

Which would have been ok, in any situation *but* the one we were into.

The way my knuckles snapped against the cartilage of his nose likely wouldn't be helping our friendship. But really, I couldn't care less. Once he was unconscious again, I went back to my inefficient nursing of Thalia, who refused to wake for more than a few scant, feverish seconds during which she grumbled and alternated cursing with puking.



*At least she's so out of it that she doesn't know we are on an airplane.* I thought with a shadow of amusement.

"This is not what I was expecting to see." a voice stole me from my musings. Not a simple voice. A *voice*.

Something that trembled with unexpressed power, a sound that withheld a hidden quality and depth. Something that I sure as hell not only wasn't expecting, but I actively tried to avoid.

I turned my head towards the source of the sound to find a woman in her late thirties, with a regal bearing and features that seemed cut in marble. Flawless skin, large breasts, wide hips, delicate hands. Her elegant black dress, despite being somewhat conservative, didn't manage to subtract anything to her statuesque beauty.

"Who might you be?" I asked, wary of some form of attack. Not that I could have done anything to stop it, in any case.

She gave me a pointed stare before she raised her left hand to adjust the brown hair that didn't need to be fixed, but I caught her only accessory: a simple golden band on her ring finger. Her brown eyes with sparks of gold captured again my attention when she rose a delicate eyebrow, as to say 'Are we really playing this game?'

Begrudgingly, I lowered my head in what could have passed for an approximation of a bow, if seen through squinted eyes in a dark room: "Queen of the Gods."

Normally I would have called her by name, and fuck the consequences, however, I was on an airplane in the company of bastards, being one myself. And Thalia was Zeus' daughter, I had hoped that this would be enough to keep the flight safe since we were crossing the King of the Gods' domain, but with Hera here...

"Such hardship only to pretend proper manners." She commented, her expression managing to convey how much I displeased her without having to infuse her voice with any kind of tone. I couldn't help it, and my lips parted to reveal a mirthless smile that showed too many teeth to be anything but a barely restrained snarl. **I am free.**

The first brick that defined this existence of mine strengthened my resolve, keeping me from falling from my seat in a crumpled mess. Bowing was no longer among the things I could accomplish without forcing myself.

*Maybe I should see this as a bargain? I'll be courteous and she won't turn us into motes of dust?* However, an agreement set conditions, and I could almost feel the weight the use of manners was imposing upon me. It wasn't a chain, not by a long shot, and I needed to bear it, doing so willingly. Still, it felt forced, and I felt my muscles tense under my skin.

"At least you show that you value your lives above your pride." She kept her absolutely unimpressed attitude: "It's more than I can expect given your less than decent origin, and still less than what I would usually demand."

I waited in silence, not quite meeting her eyes, and without a doubt *not* ogling her. It would have been a slight insult to the Holiness that was marriage and if Zeus found out I had no doubt he could deep fry my bones with a lightning bolt.

"We'll make do, I suppose." She hauntingly sniffed, staring me down: "You know why I'm here." her voice was like a golden trumpet stating its value, it was clear and demanding.

I only nodded, I Hated the idea of needing her license to speak, but I had to keep the others two safes, and while usually, gods couldn't directly challenge mortals, I suspected that our escapades in her garden counted as an attack. I felt like I was walking in thin ice, and the silence stretched itself for a couple of minutes while she kept watching me.

"So you can show some resemblance of respect, I would call it admirable if I didn't know it's shown out of fear." She tilted her head: "But why would you fear me, mmh?"

She rose from her seat and strode regally in my direction: "Perhaps you know I have a reason to be... upset, with you? For something more than the conditions of your birth maybe?"

Her sarcasm went vastly unappreciated by me, and I couldn't help but to mentally thank Hypnos for keeping both Thalia and Luke asleep.

"Do you understand why the circumstances make me... Ah, let's say curious, shall we? Curious about why you are carrying my husband's last betrayal poisoned by Ladon, along with the little thief, away from my garden with such haste?" She stopped less than a meter from me, her eyes briefly leaving me in order to glance over my two companions, she didn't bother hiding her revulsion, even if the souring of her expression did nothing to damage her statuary beauty.

I nodded once more, still holding my tongue behind my teeth, afraid of my choice of words in case I were to answer. "I know there is nothing here that belonged to my garden, that the missing apples have been eaten by those wretched nymphs while you three managed to distract Ladon, even if those little liars insisted on having eaten only one." She sniffed disdainfully.

"The Fates will have their hands full with you three, and since you didn't manage to steal anything, I'll let you three live, but I promise you, it will come a moment when each of you will think about this moment, and curse your survival." Her words weighed down on me like a bar of steel, making me strain my muscles to the tearing point in order to avoid falling from my seat and bowing my head.

"This is your only warning. Do not test me again." And once she said that, she was gone in a flash of golden light.

We landed without fuss, even if heavy rain started falling over us while a rich dumbass got his car stolen. I couldn't help but rage against the relatively brief but adrenaline-filled race towards the camp, the surprise visit from Hera having let me seething and almost frothing at the mouth. The slick road and slow mortals driving their cars forcing me to go slower than I'd have liked did not help the attempt to keep my cool.

We were a few minutes from Long Island when Luke stirred again. I had to restrain myself from punching him again, but if I had to be honest, I started to fear that the several hits to his head could end up giving him something worse than a concussion.

I had chucked him behind Thalia's seat, the knocked out mortal slumped in the trunk, and I adjusted the mirror in order to see his face while I was driving.

"The Oracle, what did it say when you left?" I asked when I saw him once more regain his senses. My tone was flat, and my eyes betrayed no emotions. Yet, it was very clear that I was more than simply pissed. He had charged against Ladon, turning him directly against us, not leaving me the time to properly organize my thoughts nor allowing us to make some sort of plan.

However, between the likely dehydration, and the several hits to the head, the son of Hermes chose unconsciousness over answering my question.

Less than an hour later, when we came close to the Camp, I unbelted Thalia and started running, already knowing what was going to happen. My mind, once it made its way beyond my rage and frustration, analyzed the situation. *Too many coincidences. He chose to set out for this quest with only Thalia as his companion, ignoring my skill out of fear I'd seduce her. Luke loses his cool in the worst possible moment, I can't remember where I put my stuff in the Garden, wind opposes the airplane, and neither he nor I are healers, so we can't help Thalia on our own, while Hera jumps out of nowhere only to freak me out*

When a rumbling thunder echoed over my head I gritted my teeth. *And like hell this rain is natural.*

I had either forgotten or ignored that Fate was a thing in the reality I was living. I didn't know if there was some form of sabotage going on, or if the events simply fell on their own to match the situations that Riordan had written. Or maybe Fate was something else entirely, and my taxed mind was grasping straws.

The jet lag between San Francisco and New York was of three hours, meaning that, while we started our flight only a single hour after the sunset, we went towards the night, and as such, the relatively brief hike from the car to the camp was done into the

darkness. The moon would have shone upon us, if not for the unnatural lightning storm that I felt *watching* us.

I parked and quickly left my seat, walking around the car and reaching Thalia, unlatching her seatbelt and carrying her as a potatoes sack over my right shoulder. Whatever ill effect the venom was having on her, it wasn't something I could hold back carrying her gently. I left Luke in the car, he could sort himself out.

The rain was annoying and the wind kept buffeting me, choosing the worst possible moments to make me lose my balance, the wet grass sliding under my feet, pebbles, roots and *everything* under the sky seemed to exist only to hinder me. The little light the moon should have provided even though the cloudy sky seemed too shy to help me see the path, forcing me to follow my memory more than my eyes.

Thalia's weight was, almost unsurprisingly the less problematic challenge I was facing. Unsurprisingly because after the sky, finding in myself the strength for carrying the fourteen years old demigoddess was easy. Almost because I *really* didn't expect to feel the whole world act against me. I reached the summit of the small hill before the border of the Half-blood Camp, my legs burning too much for it to be caused only by muscular fatigue, and yet I endured. Step, after step, after step. I walked forward, shifting my weight in order for it to counter the winds, and in the flash of lightning, I suddenly recognized the Camp, I was on the right track, less than fifty meters from the border of the protections, which I could already see as a sort of shimmer through the pelting rain, noticeable only because I was extremely sensitive to magic.

*I can make it.*

Then my right foot slipped, my muscles seizing in a sudden cramp, forcing me to stumble forward. The slippery wet grass was waiting that moment to capitalize on my weakness, completing the work.

I fell forward, My arms naturally coming down to arrest my fall, and with the movement, Thalia, rolled off me and on the grass, crossing exactly the border with the camp.

In that moment, I got goosebumps, my skin tingled, hairs shooting straight up. I didn't hear it immediately, but I saw it.

In my head, there were a lot of facts about lightning: the bottom tip of a lightning bolt traveling from a cloud to the ground does travel rather quickly, although it travels at much less than the speed of light. A lightning discharge consists of electrons that have been stripped from their molecules flying through the air. They are accelerated by a strong electric field, a consequence of the big voltage difference between the cloud and the ground. They crash into air molecules on their way down and free other electrons, making a tube of ionized air. The "leader", the first stroke of a lightning discharge, actually proceeds in steps - lengthening by about 30 meters at a time, taking about a

microsecond (one-millionth of a second) to do each step. There is a pause between steps of about 50 microseconds. The whole process may take a few milliseconds (one-thousandths of a second), providing enough time to perceive motion. Most of the charge flows after this leader makes electrical contact with the ground, however. A powerful "return stroke" releases much more energy. That's not the whole story, however, a lightning flash may have only one return stroke or may have several tens of strokes using the same column of ionized air.

And yet, whatever I saw broke every rule and fact I knew about natural phenomena. A single, straight, impossible lightning cut the sky open like a line drawn in white ink over black paper. Faster than it should have been possible, it came and went before my mind could properly register its presence.

It touched Thalia and there was a flash, that much I know and remember.

## **KRABOOM**

I heard the thunder of the first strike from Zeus, and I saw the flash of a second one: following an instantaneous and violent gut feeling, I stabbed my knife in the dirt, before slamming myself flat against the ground.

The second lighting strike was much more physics friendly, it came down zig-zagging through the sky, choosing to strike the pommel of my knife instead of me.

Then physics took a vacation, and an explosion turned everything black.

23 July 2000

The thrumming pain in my head was the reason I awoke. It wasn't nice.

It was downright awful.

Finding yourself in a place you can't immediately recognize would spook anyone, and for a second, I examined my surroundings looking for either an enemy or a weapon to use, before my brain actually kicked in and I recognized the Camp's infirmary.

Groggily, I rose from my seat and grabbed the clothes that had been thoughtfully placed on my bedrest. Living among demigods meant that short of a crippling injury or instantaneous death, between ambrosia and healing mumbo jumbo from either Chiron or Apollo's kids, mostly everyone survived pretty terrifying wounds.

Sure, at some point the demigods left the Camp and ended up killed, but hey, if you're over 18 years old nobody cares a rat's fart about your violent death.

Such was the beauty of the world I lived in.

I left the infirmary after having chugged down two gulps of nectar, I knowingly ignored the Lichtenberg figures on my arms caused by something that I didn't remember, and walked towards the boundary of the Camp, without bothering to recognize the campers' hellos or wary whispering. It was night, but since it was a stormless one, I suspected it had already been a day since the lightning.

I already knew what I would find, it didn't take any kind of stretch of the imagination to figure it out. Surprisingly enough, I wasn't grieving nor in apoplectic rage. But I was *pissed*.

The fact that such an event happened both in the books and in this reality hinted as something above me pulling the strings. *Plan A: Golden Fleece*. My mind shot forward considering the possibilities.

*No, scratch that. Plan A: Hekate is the goddess of magic, involving her will cost me something, but 'she wants to see what I will do'. She should at least be interested.* I shook briefly my head, starting the walk uphill towards what i really didn't want to check.

*Plan B: complete the second project with David, then Golden Fleece.*

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down, there was a problem, and I already had two possible solutions, it could be way worse. "Why there are so many people around after curfew?" I asked a random kid.

"Mr. D and Chiron have been summoned to Olympus, and everyone wanted to see Thalia's tree." he quickly answered before taking a wary step back when he saw my face contort itself in rage. *Thalia is not a martyr to be gawked at.*

When I recognized one of the demigods around the imposing pine tree, I grabbed the forefront of his shirt and held him less than a palm from my face: "The fucking oracle, what did it tell you for the quest?"

The son of Hermes looked at me with vacant eyes, a defeated expression he had no right to wear on his face.

*"Not alone you'll go west,*

*Go fast, for there one will rest,*

*With a silent weeper, and the hungry thieves.*

*After the quest, a wordsmith grieves.*

*Two only will walk after the task*

*with direction the first, broken the last,*

*rooted the third, to not travel the world,*

*It's the price to pay for the broken vow.*" his voice reached everyone around the clearing, and the expression of many went from sad to... well, not enraged, but quite annoyed. Far from being complete idiots, they had likely followed my same interpretation of the last part, and being the reasonable cunts that weren't actually friends with Thalia, but were ready to enjoy every occasion to bashing someone else, they wasted no time in taking a collective step back from him.

I took another step in his direction, the frail control I had over my temper thinning even more: "And you chose to ask Thalia, the only one born under a broken vow on the Styx, as your only companion." while my voice remained quiet, I felt my face contort itself in abject fury: "Because you were jealous."

A part of me knew that he was a teen desperate for attention and with more than a few issues, I knew that he was a cardinal element of the world I was living into and that Fate had more than a veiled interest in him.

Too bad that I was fresh out of fucks to give.

"No! I wouldn't..." he stammered, his honest outrage hot enough to push him through his daze, but not enough to not be interrupted by me.

I desperately wanted to say something to *hurt* him, but there weren't words to express myself. I simply punched him.

*Hard.* My knuckles burying themselves into the pit of his stomach, causing him to bend forward, enough to meet my other hand, which came in a downward haymaker that carried my intention of punting him into the ground.

Which kind of idiot asks for a prophecy and doesn't try to figure it out before going on the fucking adventure? But then, if one can ignore a prophecy, is it even valid?

My mind went through those options without my consent nor attention, which was focused on the son of Hermes, and I looked almost like a passenger on my body as my right hand clasped the forefront of his shirt and held him close enough for my forehead to crash against his nose. After that my rage was... gone. Maybe I just recognized the futility of manhandling Luke. *It won't help Thalia.*

I glared at the back of two sons of Hermes that came to drag away his slumped form but didn't stop them.

"I may have a way to heal Thalia." I said loud enough to be heard by the ones around me: "If it doesn't work, I'll need fifteen voluntaries for plan B. I'll choose who, my team, my rules."

I turned to go away only to come immediately to a full stop: less than five meters from me there was a shriveled-up mummy of an old lady in a tie-dyed hippie dress. I remembered and heard enough to know that this was the infamous Oracle, the same one that sprouted the bullshit prophecy that fucked with Luke's head enough to make him not think clearly. Be it deliberate or not, the act of telling the future had been instrumental in shaping the events.

The raspy whispers that came with her sudden intake of breath remembered me of the sheer *wrongness* that Fate was. It was unavoidable, the ultimate cage. **I am free.**

I didn't think, didn't plan, I reacted: with two steps I was in front of the Oracle.

"The price to be paid for the broken vow, uh?" I hissed, less than an inch from its face: "Look closely into your future little Oracle, and tell me, what will happen if I hear a *single word* leave your wrinkled mouth?"

The rasping breath deepened, and whatever sort of fake life the mummy seemed to hold, it seemed to no longer want it, because it started to talk: "*Change...*"

As soon as I heard the word, I slammed my foot on its stomach, hurling back the talking corpse and following in pursuit. I was *done with* the shit Fate was throwing around.

I was about to bury my punch into his head when I felt a sudden spike of *danger* coming from my side. I turned my punch into a fast roll over the damp grass, and in a fraction of second, I was jumping on a new trajectory, narrowly avoiding what felt like a streak of pale moonlight.

When I righted myself, I stared at my aggressor: female, beautiful, coppery colored skin and dark eyes, a silver circlet braided into the top of her long dark hair. And more importantly, a silvery arrow ready to be unleashed.

I stilled, she was far from being a mediocre archer, and I would have a single opportunity to attack. I studied carefully my opponent, taking notice of how two of the campers were suddenly holding their knives in threatening motions against other girls with silvery arrows, while the other demigods had suddenly taken several steps back from the confrontation, and were running around like headless chickens: "Someone call the Cabins' Heads!" and other such tripe.

I kept my attention on my opponent: "Any reason why you thought attacking me was a good idea?" I asked sardonically, Mist rolling over the area and slowly creeping up the girls I had never seen before.

"You dare touch what is beyond your station. The Oracle is under the protection of Akesios." her voice rippled through the air, managing to express her outrage and disgust for my action, along with the contempt I was held in. My mind quickly recognized one of the surnames of Apollo, under which he was worshipped in Elis, where he had a



splendid temple in the agora. That surname, which has the same meaning as akestôr and alexikakos, characterized the god as the averter of evil, in particular, the young woman tried to associate the prophecies given by the Oracle to the 'averting of evil'. From the way she held herself, I had no doubt it was done knowingly.

"The sun isn't up, what's it to you?" I seethed. I decided that prophecies were better not heard, and like hell I was going to listen to a single word.

"My Lady wouldn't allow it." she quietly answered, her arms unwavering despite the tension she was applying to her weapon.

I snorted, once more observing her features: "I couldn't care less about your lady, who are *you* to stay in my way?"

"I am Zoe Nightshade, Lieutenant of the Hunt, and I will defend the Oracle from the brutality of men." she proudly stated.

I didn't bother holding back a sigh, this brought feminism to a whole new level of idiocy. *I'm all for equality, but only because the Oracle's body was one of woman, she could sprout prophecies that had as the only effect one of the disturbing mental processes enough to turn a quest that could have gone smoothly in the clusterfuck it became. All without consequences? I don't think so.*

"I did warn the Oracle to keep her forked tongue behind her teeth. She ignored my prophecy, she pays the price, much like Luke did with hers." I rolled my shoulders, noticing with a frown that the Mist couldn't overcome the moonlight.

"You dare?" she hissed, the sheer outrage that emanated from her form was almost visible to the naked eye.

At that I laughed, my burning hot rage turning into something cold and calculative: "You'd be surprised by what I dare accomplish, little nymph. Lipari is right, you *are* self-entitled."

I had no qualms about revealing my presence in the garden since Hera already knew, and while the only time I ever spoke about zoe was with Atlas, I had no intention of revealing that tidbit of information. *What did Atlas say?*

*'it hurt me discovering that one of them betrayed her family, forsaking her own name.'*

She recoiled as if I had struck her, and at that moment I shot forward, swerving right to avoid another streak of pale moonlight and clamping my hands upon her wrists. "You think you are above consequences because you slave away your name under the Apanchomenê?"

When she heard how I had called Artemis, it was like all her strength had bled out.

"Apancho-what?" asked a child of Atena that didn't know what to do to stop the situation from escalating, but couldn't resist the opportunity to learn something new.

I tilted my head questioningly, dropping Zoe's wrists and turning around to notice that the tensions between the two demigods and the two huntresses had somehow deflated when Zoe didn't fight back. "The Oracle used words and fucked us over, you defended it in your Lady's name, so let me use words to make you reap what you sowed." I sported a bloodthirsty grin, finding a better way to get revenge over the huntress stopping me from destroying the Oracle.

With a wide gesture of my hands, I started telling a story: "In the neighborhood of the town of Caphyae in Areadia, in a place called Condylea, there was a sacred grove of Artemis Condyleatis. On one occasion when some boys were playing in this grove, they put a string round the goddess' statue, and said in their jokes they would strangle Artemis. Some of the inhabitants of Caphyae who found the boys thus engaged in their sport, stoned them to death."

I turned slowly on myself, noting that everyone around me, even the other two huntresses, was waiting for me to complete the story: "Even with the guilty stoned to death, She of The Wild is the goddess of the hunt, the moon, and chastity. And since she helped her mother give birth to her twin, she is also the goddess of childbirth. After the offense given by the boys, all the women of Caphyae had premature births, and all the children were brought dead into the world."

I looked again at the Lieutenant of the Hunt: "This calamity did not cease until the boys were honorably buried, and an annual sacrifice to their manes was instituted in accordance with the command of an oracle of Apollo. The surname of Condyleatis was then changed into Apanchomene."

Everyone was holding their breath, waiting for a rebuttal from Zoe, or a divine punishment from the heavens, I didn't know nor care, I snorted derisively one last time and turned my back on her looking at the Athena's son who had asked for an explanation.

"If you are one of the people in charge of teaching mythology to the newcomers, it's no wonder that everyone only dreams of quests and being claimed." I shook my head, letting the action express what I thought of the situation, and left the area, there was nothing more to be said.

After the less than flattering first meeting with a member of the Hunt, I dragged myself back to the special three-way crossroad, taking the fourth path and walking back to my abode. I felt... spent. More for my confrontation against the Hunters than for the lack of sleep. *Sure, seeing Thalia being hit by a bolt of lightning and becoming a fucking tree less than 10 minutes from a healer hasn't done me any favors.*

I eyed critically my home: I had managed to greatly improve it, it actually resembled a proper hut: I had placed straight wooden poles in two concentric circles, and filled the space between with sacks of sand. It wasn't much, but it worked. The roof was an oblique plane made with planks of wood, and the door...

*Well, I've never been a carpenter.* I somewhat consoled myself, looking dejectedly at a wooden door held in place by rocks.

I entered my frankly horrible hut, eager to sleep in the hammock I had tied inside. *The summer is hot enough that I don't need to lit up the brazier.* I was sighing in relief while taking the first step inside when I tripped and fell.

"What the fuck?" I exclaimed, a mix of surprise and irritation coloring my voice.

Looking on the ground, my eyes quickly found the reason behind my fall: a freshly pruned tree branch, and a very familiar one. At its side, a jute sack wrapped in a black band with 'HERMES EXPRESS' printed in gold over it.

Without thinking, but with a growing hope that was quickly turned into certainty, flashes of what I had forgotten blossoming in my mind.

*I awoke under a column of sky held by Atlas with my body screaming abuse. I realized that for Ouranos I was unworthy of attention he didn't hate me, nor my shoulders for holding him, but it was clear that he despised every one of my muscles equally. I could feel my tendons grinding together, my joints locked and stiff, and even my heart was beating erratically. "You held the sky for a whole night." Atlas rumbled, his voice wavering between amusement and respect "Your will matched mine, but your body is without a doubt mortal, consequences are your curse." I squinted my eyes at him, focusing on his words, dissecting them for hidden meanings. Anything but acknowledging my body's outraged screams. I was thinking of an appropriately prideful answer when everything faded to black.*

*When I came back to my senses, I saw that the sun had long since started his path towards the west and that I had an hour or two at most before the dusk.*

*Forcing my body to obey, I rolled on my stomach, scrambling to get my legs under me. "I have to admit," I spoke, marveling at the gravely and scratchy sound that left my mouth, "That it's been far more than simply interesting."*

*The low rumble of rocks falling one over another was the amused chuckle of the Titan made me look at his amused expression: "What is your name, mortal?" he asked.*

*I tilted my head, considering his request. It would have been fair answering truthfully, after all I knew the titan. And sooner or later, a monster or resentful demigod would*

*give my name to the son of Gea. Or at least, he would find out once the Titan War started.*

*Still, keeping the cards close to my chest was a smart move.*

*But I liked Atlas. And frankly, after the freak out I had pushed him through, I doubted he could divine any deeper understanding of me from my name. Sure, the simple act of answering or not would have given him an in into my personality. And even the long minutes I was spending analyzing the situation was telling him about my natural carefulness.*

*Oh, fuck it, what's the point of being alive if you never risk anything? I asked to myself.*

*"I was named Icarus." I smiled winningly at the Titan. I didn't tell him it was my name, nor that it wasn't.*

*"Icarus." he repeated, "I can see the similarities with your predecessor, even if you seem to have what it takes to back up your excessive daring. I'll remember this name."*

*I frowned at his answer. Why every chat with an immortal turns out to be a game I don't know the rules of? I wondered.*

*"How would you know about the first Icarus? He came after your time." I asked, slowly limping towards the backpack that I had discarded against a rock.*

*"The Hours are chatty, as are the Winds, even the Stars echo what they find interesting." was his totally-not-obscure answer.*

*I popped a small cube of ambrosia in my mouth, relishing in the warmth that soothed my abused muscles, untying knots, and relaxing my shoulders. "Another mystery for me, uh?"*

*I dragged out of my backpack the project David had cursed me for: celestial bronze, of a rectangular shape, 70x25x15 centimeters, and was covered in greek letters which could slide on several tracks.*

*"Are you familiar with mortals' music?" I asked, pressing an Alpha letter that acted like an on-off button.*

*Keith Jarreth's piano music started to play around the relatively small plateau at the top of Mount Othrys, and I was happy to see the dumbfounded expression on Atlas' face.*

*"I am not." He replied, clearly torn between confusion and curiosity: "I didn't hear anything about music since Orpheus managed to undo Tanathos' work."*

*At which I frowned: "I thought that he was the peaceful aspect of death, Atropos is the sudden one."*

*The titan grinned, his eyes never leaving the over-glorified jukebox I had David build. "My mistake then." He corrected himself, but his shit-eating grin told me that there was something else at work in his words.*

*I let my fingers trail over the celestial bronze jukebox until I found a circular section, which I turned this and that way until I was satisfied.*

*"I set it so that it will play from dawn to dusk." I told the titan distractedly, walking over the branch he had clearly ripped from the golden apple tree and bringing out my trusty, multi-purpose knife.*

*Going around with it is a must, but it's hardly manageable. I commented by myself, my eyes landing briefly over the round mounds hid by the jute sack. I didn't want to test myself so soon with six Immortality Apples.*

*"You would have me listen to mortal music, Icarus." Atlas accused me.*

*I didn't know if his use of my name should have made me feel something, but I couldn't discern any kind of magic suddenly moving around me, so I ignored it. "I would have you learn a bit of what humans have made since you have been tasked with holding the sky, yes."*

*Atlas was too prideful to ask why, and I wouldn't have answered him anyway. Music, along with the other Arts, was simply a branch of mankind's skills that best expressed our creativity and dreams. Maybe it would be enough to not have him join into Kronos' crusade, or at least to make Atlas spare some humans out of curiosity in case the Titan War was lost. Frankly, it was my reserve plan in case everything went to shit due to my presence in that reality. Well, more hope of a miracle than a plan, if Kronos wins, I'll have other shit to care about instead of preserving human culture. I amended in my mind.*

*Watching the slow descent of the sun, I knew that I was short of time if I wanted to enter the garden of dusk. How to get the nymphs to not call on Ladon once I am inside? I wondered while carefully pruning the branch and setting aside both twigs and leaves.*

*Corrupting them with an apple. Was the immediate answer.*

*But how do I make sure they don't steal my shit until I leave with Thalia and Luke once they join me? My mind outlined for me the next problem.*

*My eyes fell on the canteen still full of Dionysus' brand of wine and a smirk blossomed on my face, a plan starting to take form in my devilishly twisted mind.*

*Bribery with an apple, getting wasted with the wine. I reassumed the general lines. Now, how to keep them away from my loot?*

*Minutes later, when the magic jukebox had left classical music behind only to jump to hip hop, the solution jumped to the forefront of my mind. Didn't Hermes have a Fed-Ex jig going on?*

I opened the jute sack and watched inside with a shadow of satisfaction worming its way on my face. Thalia's situation had been a hit, but one I knew how to fix, more or less. Finding out that my trip ended up with a sound success was a gladly received surprise.

Above the golden loot, there was a square piece of paper, folded like a couple of snakes spiraling around each other. *Which is impossible, it doesn't matter how good you are with origami.*

I frowned and picked up the strange 3-D construct, which unfurled on its own, revealing a message written in ancient greek: *I took the drachmas for the expedition, and a single apple to keep the transaction off the books. Well played, but I allowed you to use my godly services to secure your loot only because you are one of my favorite thieves. It won't happen again!*

*(Unless you keep 'tipping' so awesomely!)*

*Safe Travels!*

*-Hermes*

My mind went blank for several seconds.

*Safe Travels.* I read it again. *Why does it feel like he knew I would Travel? It could pass as a reference to his realm, but its annoyingly convenient...*

"What do I do with four of one of the most sought after prizes in the world?" I muttered to myself, pushing the thought of Hermes' message to the back of my mind. For a second, I felt like at the end of an RPG game, at the point where you have just so much gold and artifacts that you couldn't use them all even if you wanted to. Then I remembered that Plan A required Hekate assistance, and I knew what I needed to do.

*Golden apples of immortality are hardly going to rot.* I mused silently, letting my newfound sensibility towards magical flora wash over my treasure: I had to forcibly snap my eyes closed in order to stop myself from gobbling down the golden fruits. Their *presence* was... unique. In the garden, they were subdued, in the same way, a single voice in a choir was hard to pick up, but here? It was like hearing a constant humming just beyond my line of sight, a whisper of a promise that was not uttered out loud. The image of the sand stopping its flow inside of an hourglass, and the song of eons passing leaving the one to eat one apple undisturbed.

I felt around the four blazing presences that the apples were, taking notice about how unquestioningly *alive* they felt, and my senses fell to the pruned branch from which they had been picked. It was... *waiting*? For what, I had no idea.

With a sigh, I reached my hammock and collapsed into it, Hermes letter clutched into my hand, thinking about the implications. In the books, Thalia had been turned into a tree. Now, she had become a tree once more, and again, before she could hit 16 years of age, so the big ass prophecy was not triggered. And it was clear that Artemis' hunters had been asked to recruit Thalia and Bianca in the books, exactly for the purpose of delaying the prophecy.

I frowned, instinctively disliking that Hermes or anyone knew what I was going to do before me. *How do I solve the problem?*

My first plan of action was in my opinion reasonable: finish the ship I had asked David to craft, man it, and sail to find the Golden Fleece. There was no reason to invent again the wheel, after all, it healed Thalia the first time, it could do it again. And while grabbing the ten years old Percy Jackson was tempting if only to keep the sea complacent towards us during our travel, I knew that plot armor extended itself only to the characters with an extremely meaningful connection with the main character, which was something I had neither the patience nor the inclination to cultivate. *Hades, I barely manage to behave like a functional human with Thalia and Luke, and they basically raised themselves fighting monsters, a coddled ten years old would bring me to make human offerings again.*

But the problem was another: *How do I make sure Thalia isn't forcibly turned into a slave for a stuck up, weak-willed goddess or metamorphosized into another tree just because Zeus is a dumbass?*

I fell asleep pondering my options.

The night was quiet and without wind, the only sound that could be heard over the bristling of the flames in the brazier was the low echo of the waves, just beyond the trees. The new moon gave only a dim light, but in the cloudless sky, it almost resembled a bloodthirsty grin, while the shadows in the clearing twisted and rolled one over another. It took me weeks to figure out how to call Hekate, and in all that time I dedicated myself to push forward the project I had going on with David: building a fucking ship.

I cut my palm with a switchblade, letting enough of my blood to fill the cup I was making with my hand, and tossed it into the fire, the memory of my mother clear in my mind.

"Hekate." I called, "Mother, I have a bargain for you." *Magic has a price has it not? Let's see if it holds true for the goddess of magic.*

The fire flickered, before turning silver, with an eerie howling, which had nothing to do with wolves and wind, and was more resembling of a door opening and suddenly allowing a current of air to pass through. And out of a door that I couldn't see, my mother walked into the clearing.

She was the same as the last time I had seen her, only, she was sporting a smile that I could have mistaken for a strange mixture of pride and motherly affection.

It really had no place on the face of the goddess who, from what I could discern, had ripped my soul from its previous existence and chucked it into a bastard that she had for shit and giggles.

She tilted her head questioningly while walking forward, her hand trailing gently across my cheek: "Normally I wouldn't have answered, and if any mortal dared call me and actually expect me to come would be punished for his daring."

Her hand came to rest on my neck, and when I felt her rest her dainty fingers on the sides of my throat to squeeze lightly, I found myself unable to move.

"Heal Thalia." I asked.

She chuckled, shaking her head in a slow and almost gentle denial: "No can do, the King turned her, and even if I were amenable to go against his wishes, Ladon's venom is not something a mortal can be healed from. Even a demigod of the Big Three."

"What do you know about the divine properties of demigods?" she suddenly asked, forcing me to raise an eyebrow in mock outrage.

*A test, really?* I rolled my eyes: "Each demigod can operate in the realm of his divine parent, the extent of his powers, or better yet, the extent of his influence over his godly parent's realm is limited by either the relationship with the said parent or the... strength, I guess, of the demigod."

And while I was saying it, I frowned: "Well, that's not exact, is not about strength, but about the... *assertiveness*? Strength of character? Will? Understanding of said domain?"

"Your observations are vague to the point that they almost sound incorrect, darling." Hekate chastized me: "But I shall enlighten you: " she raised a torch while saying that, the fire on it blazing silver and light filling the clearing for a brief instant.

"The right to manipulate your divine parent's domain is bestowed upon conception and cannot be taken back. Sure, if I were cross with you, my dear Icarus, you would find the Mist extremely uncooperative."

My eyes narrowed: "You like me." I accused her, "That's why my illusions sometimes act without the need for explicit instructions on my part."



The goddess grinned: "Yes, well done spotting it. But its also due to your upbringing, your familiarity with my domain is, after all, an important factor."

"Does it means I could call upon storm and earthquakes?" I asked, eager for an answer.

"Do not make questions you already now the answer of." she chided me.

I raised my hands and drew small circles on my temples: "The Big Three, along with their sisters... what is the difference between them and the other gods?"

"Being children of the Titan of Time is surely a factor, that defines the... let's say hierarchy, he was the previous Ruler and the one to organize the demise of his father. But the nature of their domain is far more relevant. Think Icarus, the sky, the sea, the underworld, what do they have in common?"

"They were beyond terrifying to humans, back during ancient Greece golden age, I swear." I instinctively answered, "Or at least the ones that raised the more questions: mankind had always stared in wonder at the sky, wondered about the meaning of death, and was awed or terrified by the sea, obsessing on what existed beyond the horizon."

My... *mother*, smiled mysteriously, not explaining further.

"So... I cannot summon earthquakes and hurricanes?." I frowned.

"You did admirably in your challenges, why would you look into your father's side of the family?" she asked sardonically, giving me pause.

"What happened to 'Do not make questions you already know the answer for' ?" I half-heartedly protested.

"You are the one who called me here, entertaining me is the least you can do." A delicate eyebrow rose on her forehead.

"First: there is no way in Hades that you chose randomly the father for the body you chucked my soul into." I raised a finger, as I was counting: "Second: Thalia was unstoppable, she didn't get tired until we where out of danger, and she doesn't have to think about her power as I do, she kept us alive without any extraordinary grasp of her divine side. Third: I use every tool I can, it's a matter of principle."

"Well argumented dear." she said, resuming her walk around me, "But as you are beginning to learn, actions have consequences, and everything as a price, but I need to hear what you're looking for if you're seeking my counsel."

"What do I have to do to gain over Poseidon's realm the same birthright Thalia has over her father's domain?" I asked clearly, my chin rising a bit as if I was challenging her.

"You would need to do stuff you can't hope to survive, I, however... With apples from the Queen's garden, I could make it work." She tilted her head expectantly.

"Apples? As in, more than one?" I asked.

"Don't be deliberately obtuse dear, there is a reason why Heracles had been tasked with plucking three." she started walking around me like some kind of predator eyeing its next meal.

Saying that it unnerved me was redundant. "Three apples to gain over Poseidon's realm the same birthright Thalia has over her father's domain." I repeated, carefully avoiding using Poseidon's name but making sure she wouldn't give me the power of someone else's grandfather.

"Indeed, one for me to set things in motion and kept the whole thing hidden, one for another who will need to help to pull a certain string, and one spent to... well, you don't have the frame of reference to understand what I'll do with it." She explained, making me only more suspicious.

"You are unnervingly talkative and informative about this matter, while obviously hiding something. Any reason why?" Not knowing what actually was going to be done with my prize greatly unnerved me.

She sauntered towards me and placed her hands on my shoulders, her torches floating quietly at her sides: "Oh, dearie, haven't we already had this conversation? You are my masterpiece, I want to see what kind of things you can accomplish, besides, giving the payment, it's only fair that I explain, but magic is a mystery, so I can't tell you everything."

"Those three apples are an awfully high price to pay without knowing what they will be used for..." I objected half-heartedly.

"When the price is paid, your claim can gain... weight, but you'll take something not meant for you, cabin 11 influence over you is clear." she started, before lightly shaking her head: "Dearie, this isn't like a professor of mathematics teaching you something too advanced for you to understand, it's like a dragon teaching a stone how to fly."

I slowly handed over a small sack with three apples: "There you go, *mother*." I noted with a sarcastic tint to my voice.

She grinned to me almost impishly: "Don't be sad for the loss of your treasure, even if greed suits you, apples cannot stay among mortals. Even the last time, they couldn't remain with Eurystheus. After all the trouble Hercules went through to get them, he had to return them to the goddess Council, who took them back to the garden that was then at the northern edge of the world."

I sighed: "I already gave you my apples, mother."

"That you did. However, certain conditions are to be met before your request can be executed." Hekate answered, looking amused.

"Conditions?" I said with a low growl.

"You'll feel the difference once I'll be done with my part, but from there on you'll have to... oh, you'll find out." And with a mad cackle, my mother vanished in a flash of silvery fire that gave off the impression of moonlight.

## **Chapter 10: Adamas**

13 September 2000

The sun glared harshly enough to be felt even under the wide straw hat I was wearing and flashed my eyes even when hidden under my sunglasses. Not that I ever faced the sun, these days, but its reflection on the sea was enough to transmit the dislike of Apollo. Since our return, I had taken to spend some time among the other demigods, looking for who I'd want on my mission to recover the Golden Fleece. I already had a vague outline of who I'd want to cover this or that role, but that was a hazy approximation of a plan. I didn't have plot armor, that meant that death was a quite real possibility, and as such I wanted capable people to sail with me. More than that, I wanted people sure of themselves, I couldn't waste time to check over their insecurities while we were all risking our lives. Since my meeting with Hekate, I had managed to find out the names of who I wanted with me, setting up opportune roles and a rough chain of command. Sadly, I needed one satyr to come with me.

"Yes, hitting the Oracle wasn't the wisest thing you could do." a familiar voice interrupted my considerations.

I turned to my left, leaving the light breeze to carry saltwater over me with the next wave. I chose to not answer to what was clearly an attempt to get a rise out of me, returning to look at the sea. Even if Dionysus was much better than what he looked like the first time we met, he was a far cry from being beautiful, and so the sight of the waves was a far more soothing sight. "Prophecies are either true, and so they happen in any case, or they are false, and useless in the first place." I shrugged, it was a good justification in my head, it even sounded like it made sense.

"Spare me your false reasoning, we both know that you did it because you *could*. Nothing more, nothing less." the plump god snorted, a can of diet coke appearing in his hand.

"Are you going to admonish me? Two months after the fact?" I snorted in turn, rummaging into my ice-filled sack and picking out a bottle of beer, just to spite the god.

Dionysus laughed: "Ha! Absolutely not! You managed to get away with a major offense while we Olympians were busy questioning Chiron about the recent events! And only because the sun was already down, had you tried your stunt during the day, Camp or not Camp you would have been burned to a crisp." the god took a deep gulp from the coke, while I got around to uncork mine, "And *nobody* has ever dared to hit the Oracle! After taunting it with a treath too! As soon as its patron had been informed by his twin about the events, I laughed so hard I cried!"

He gestured wildly, tossing away his empty can that dissolved itself in motes of blue light: "And you managed to avoid arrows from the Lieutenant of the Hunt, while bitchslapping around respect and reverence with stories so old we all had forgotten! The god of war was almost dancing a jig, while the blond bimbo was gushing about your just rage caused by the Fates meddling with my mortal sister's love! Ahahahah! Oh, the face of the Queen, she was conflicted between her dislike of the twins and her spite of you! This has been the most interesting meeting since the one of the Winter Solstice in 1773, when we discussed the Boston Tea Party!"

I looked back at the god, finding his amusement contagious, and, remembering I had an open beer in my hand, I tilted it in order to spill it on the ground: "For Dionysus." I intoned briefly.

Before the liquid could touch the sand, a purple fire blossomed over the ground, greedily drinking the alcoholic beverage.

I then brought the bottle to my lips and drank a bit, looking sideways at the relaxed expression on the god's face.

Choosing that there wouldn't be a better moment to ask, I opened my mouth and spoke: "At the Camp, is there a satyr with searcher's license to look for Pan? Someone not stuck up?"

Dionysus turned towards me, and I removed my sunglasses, staring back into his violet eyes: "I'm guessing you want one for your unsanctioned quest."

I shook my head: "Not a quest, it's not done for the gods, but for Thalia. Looking for something that can help her will bring us here and there, a satyr could use a group of demigods as an escort while looking around. And if he succeeds, we'll might gain help from Pan himself." I explained, "It's a win for everyone."

The god of ritual madness rose a single eyebrow in my direction, clearly not believing my words for a single instant, but he shrugged nonetheless: "I'll send you someone, Icarus."

I nodded and started to leave the beach when he called me back: "Your name has changed. It's subtle, but not something those who are familiar with you will miss."

I stared back unblinkingly, I wasn't going to talk about the events that led me to that change, it was personal. Dionysus didn't look bothered by my reticence and dismissed me with a gesture of his hands along with suitably foreboding words: "Be careful to not rise too high too fast, we wouldn't want a repeat of your predecessor's feat, would we?"

That night I left my hut and went back to the common grounds of the camp, Mist cloaking me from whatever was in charge of enforcing the curfew. Luckily enough, the full moon spared me the need of using a flashlight to go around.

I took a spear from a rack, preferring it to the sword, and twirled thoughtfully between my hands. I was still looking for a way to use the branch from the golden apple tree, I frankly needed a superweapon. Something like Thalia's spear, or Anaklusmos. With some magic to it. Objectively, it needed to be something that could help me both with the sea and with magic itself. I didn't want to stunt my growth in one direction or another because I was hasty into building the weapon. Frankly, something *a là* Whitebeard from one piece sounded cool, but pragmatism held me back.

I sighed: "Going around with it would be unwise anyway." For the time being, it was better to avoid Hera in any possible way.

When I turned once more on my self, simulating an upside swing while holding the bottom of the spear, greatly enhancing my reach, I froze: sitting on one of the benches on one side of the arena, there was a little girl. A silvery chiton that seemed woven from moonlight and water, auburn-hair, and a silver bow held gracefully in her lap. She clearly didn't need an introduction, also because she managed to arrive and sit down less than twenty meters from me without stumbling into the Mist.

I stared at her, inside of the Camp, gods could not directly act on demigods, I was sure of it. Appearances and chats were possible, even if barely tolerated by Zeus, threatening me looked like a big yes on the King's book.

I stared unblinkingly into her eyes, the 20 meters between us somehow insufficient to make such a thing impossible, and remained quiet, only quirking an eyebrow. She had been the one to initiate the contact, she would need to start the conversation. I refused to greet her or to show anything but diffidence: I owed her nothing, and frankly, anything that kept girls from becoming lustful women was on my bad side. It was the principle of the thing. The exaltation of maidens' purity was a must in every society, after all harlots and sluts needed to be shamed in order to exalt the righteousness of marriage: it was the cornerstone for a family, which was the basis of a clan, upon that was built a population large enough to count as people. With it came the concept of nation.

Historically speaking, every human society had a single man-woman couple as its starting point. Such a cornerstone couldn't exist while extramarital sex was considered acceptable for everyone.

The important thing, at the end of the day, was that authority of some sort was needed to legitimize a couple, because said authority would then act in what appeared to be the benefit of said couple while husband and wife recognized the necessity of said authority, perpetuating the idea to the offspring.

"You assaulted my Lieutenant." the crystalline voice of the goddess stopped my pondering human nature and brought me back to the present.

"I defended myself. She shot me twice before I even touched her." I answered without lying.

Artemis rose from her seat, the bow held in her hand with the bare minimum strength required for not letting it fall: "You assaulted my brother's Oracle. A gift to mortals so that they can prepare better to weather the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

*Hamlet, really?* I blinked: "Fortune-telling didn't help Macbeth." I tilted my head, following her lead on Shakespeare, before returning on more familiar ground: "Nor did Thetis' words help Achilles, or the Oracle' ones save Thalia. It's clear to me that whatever you think oracles and prophecies are, they do not help my fellow mortals."

I rolled my shoulders and kept practicing, ignoring the goddess. Ares, Aphrodite, and Dionysus didn't dislike me, at least from what the latter's words on the last Council had been; to compensate, Apollo and Artemis, along with Hera, actively disliked me. But... Hera disliked everyone. So it was a non-issue, and it wasn't like I could do something to appease the other two. Not that I felt like it.

Artemis didn't react to my disrespect, but I realized it wasn't... *safe*. She had the calm of the hunter stalking his prey, and I didn't appreciate being on the receiving end of her gaze. *How to redirect what I feel is going to be a metamorphosis followed by a merciless hunt?* It wouldn't happen now, but having her stalking me once I left the camp was... kind of scary.

I made a show of looking at the sky, easily finding the Ursa constellation: "What do you want, Huntress?" I asked to buy time. She didn't answer, walking closer, her feet not making a sound when they touched the ground.

She came less than a meter from me, and even if she was in a body barely 4 and a half feet tall, it felt like the Moon was about to fall on me, an arrow about to slid between my ribs to find my heart. **I am free.**

I blinked, and the intimidation the goddess tried to wield upon me was shredded and dispersed with the same ease a bullet would tear through a spiderweb. I refrained from snorting, I was aware that whatever confrontation I chose to push right now would end up badly.

So I redirected: "Have you heard of Pan recently?"

She took a step back, her attention splitting between me and the subject of my question: "An unusual question to make, in an even unusual situation."

She walked around me, her eyes analyzing the signs left on the sandy ground without needing her input: "I met a fox once, extremely cunning, he knew he wasn't the predator, and he knew he couldn't scare me away. So he ran, in larger and larger circles, before pretending to be dead once he crossed the trail of a pack of wolves."

"Sounds like the Teumessian Fox." I said as an avenue of conversation.

Artemis took a step back, as the surprise hit her almost like a physical blow: "The Canis Minor *does* shine upon you. Be careful, mortal, find Pan, and I won't hunt you."

She turned like she was about to run away in the night when my words stopped her: "You don't feel it? The Reef will die in less than 20 years, primeval forests are getting smaller and smaller, unexplored caves are being mapped, every peak has been flagged, every valley walked, roads and rails will grow like cancer over the vast Eastern plains, beasts and plants are going extinct in droves. If Pan wanted to be found, or was around to be found, he would have already been."

The goddess's eyes flashed silver: "I will not oppose your Travel, but only if you look for Pan. If you find him, I won't hunt you for touching my Lieutenant."

While she almost presented it as a bargain, it was clear that it wasn't, not really. *I guess that consequences come with being free and the choices it entails.* I sighed, my very complex and self-imposed mission had just turned more difficult.

17 September 2000

Like I did only twice before, I sat at the hearth, staring not at the almost cold-but-never-dead-embers, but at the little girl intent to taking care of them. "So..." I trailed "Have you heard?"

Hestia rose an unimpressed eyebrow, and I grinned sheepishly: "Right, you hear everything. Your thoughts about my recent exploits?"

"I knew Dedalus, like I've always known and will always know every familial love. He loved Icarus, and was loved back. But the son felt like he was a candle born from the sun, and when he found he could fly higher than his father, he kept going until he fell, to show Dedalus that he was worthy of being his son." She poked at the embers with a stick covered in soot.

I watched as her hand buried herself into the hearth and came out with a blazing ember clutched in it: "You are bringing with you an important part of the Family, place a brazier in the galley, and use this ember to light it up."

I looked at her with surprise on my features: "A fire on a boat made of wood? That's a bad..." I stopped when I noticed that there was no smoke rising from the glowing ember, and looked up to find Hestia's smirk while she placed it slowly in my palm and delicately closed my fingers over it, it was warm, but not overly so, it was like a gentle caress or a hug. I sighed, of all the gods, Hestia was the less malicious one, and given the vibe of the ember, the one I was more willing to listen. So, with the ember in my hand, I walked back to my hut, where I packed my stuff as neatly as I could and dismantled my brazier. The kitchen on board of the ship had carefully avoided a gas flame, David wisely ordering the cookers to be electrical, so we weren't equipped with free fire risking to kill us all.

Three hours later, I left my hut and walked back to the camp, the belongings I chose to bring with me were in a sack slung over my shoulder, with my bronze brazier clattering loudly behind me in the leather harness I had put together.

Once I reached the docking we had built only to be able to set off with our ship, I took a moment to admire it. It was made out of wood we lumbered from the forest we trained in. Everything had been hand made, from the shelves to the masts, from the engines, to the oars. The circuits had been bought, clearly, but the machinery in itself had been hardwired by Aephestus' kids. I looked at the sturdy but sleek vessel, the two masts held black sails, which were fucking cool, the bronze lined portholes shined brightly under the morning sun. The figurehead was a grinning fox exquisitely crafted, and while the name Argo II sounded unoriginal to me, I couldn't exactly oppose it publicly without telling everyone that it was dumb, calling on me further negative attention from Olympus.

I climbed up to the side of the ship after having hurled up the brazier and my sack, Hestia's ember still held in my hand, its warmth was soothing. Hydroponics cultures were set up under the glass portion of the deck, we didn't know how long we would stay away after all, while solar panels were set up everywhere we could, a collaboration between David and his beloved, which coincidentally was a daughter of Apollo.

Less than an hour later, a sack landed on the deck, signalling that my crew had started to gather. Soon we would depart.

An hour later, I called name after name, checking for freeloaders or fuckers of any kind: "David, son of Aephestus."

When the man came forward from the small crowd on the deck, I nodded appreciatively: "He's head engineer and First Mate, if I'm not around, you'll answer to him."

When he disappeared inside the hull, I continued: "Jillian, daughter of Atena, she's the second mate, third in the chain of command." I winked at the blond girl with a serious expression, while my eyes ran over her form without my input.



"Hailey, daughter of Hermes: third mate." I stated clearly, and a seventeen yers old girl came forward, she was on the petite side, and a sneaky one, but trustworthy nonetheless.

So I went on calling the members of yhe crew, assigning roles so that everyone knew that the others weren't left without stuff to do. A single daughter of Aphrodite named Evelyn was followed by three people from Ares' Cabin: Eric, Emily and Charlotte. Abigail was instead our Head Healer, from the cabin of Apollo, along with her sister Sofia who was going to take turns with her in the infirmary.

I chose to bring two daughters of Apollo not only for the healing role, which was important, but also because the last time someone disrespected the God of the Golden Charriot, it was when the Greeks pillaged and burned his temple during Troy's war, and he had reacted with the Black Death. Since I was about to leave the Camp after having kicked his Oracle, I wanted someone on board that would make the prideful god stop from simply burning us to crisps.

Madison was a daughter of Aephestus, another engineer of sorts, while Hannah, daughter of Demeter, was in charge of the Hydroponics. Julia was a daughter of Athena, who shared her sister's grey eyes and blond hair, even if her features were somewhat more delicate. Alexandra and Helena were two daughters of Dionysus, and I chose them mostly because I had come to appreciate how temporary madness could give you an edge to survive a sticky situation. And given the male/female ratio, I frankly hoped in a big ass orgy at some point during the mission, after all, I was the youngest among them.

"Charles, called Chars unless you want him to punt you into the ground, will be our resident satyr, you never know ehen an experienced child of the Wild can be life-saving." With our last addiction, I finished the crew call, and we unfurled our black sails trimmed with yellow bands, while six people on each side of the ship started rowing.

As soon as we were at safe distance from the beach, I talked again: "Each of us is a powerful demigod in his own right, more than that, each one of us is a demigod tired of playing around at the Camp without any purpose beyond the one of delighting the gods with our deaths. Power without direction is inert, and living as your common mortal isn't something that appeals any of us."

To the general consent, I spoke on: "So I could tell you the list of several possible objectives that I have set for us. But we all onow that you are here to *exercise* that power. So you don't really care what we'll be aiming for as much as actually doing the deed." I knew each one of them, some didn't volunteer, and I had to talk with them to make them recognize their own wishes, but it had been a hassle worthy of my effort.

We reached the end of the bay and steered us south, catching a costsnt wind on our backs and ordering the crew to retire the oars: "So relax while you can, because you'll need every scrap of power you can muster!"

We were running south, to the Bermuda Triangle: to us, it was the Sea of Monsters, and it was going to be fun.

21 October 2000

While the weather was impossibly warm and sloth-inducing, the sea was uncharacteristically calm, the waves barely perceptible, the wind had died down since the previous night, and, given our position in perspective with the stars, the sea itself seemed to have no currents whatsoever. So, after a day that we spent looking at each other in the eyes without doing a thing, I had quite enough. Stealing one last glance at the two girls sunbathing naked at the end of the deck and considering the setting sun and the already visible stars, I sighed and forced myself to do what was necessary.

"OKAY MAGGOTS! AT THE OARS, I'VE BEEN FRIENDLY MORE THAN ENOUGH, MOVE YOUR SORRY ASSES MOTHERFUCKERS, AND IF YOUR PARENTS EVER LOVED YOU, THERE BETTER BE SOME MYSTICAL MUMBO JUMBO GOING AROUND, BECAUSE OTHERWISE I'LL SACRIFICE THE SLOWER OF YOU TO POSEIDON! MARK MY WORDS! AND IF YOU THINK OR HOPE THAT BEING SHAGGED BY ME GRANTS YOU A PASS, WELL, THINK AGAIN! I DO NOT DISCRIMINATE! ON THIS SHIP YOU ARE ALL EQUALS, AND THAT MEANS THAT YOU ARE ALL WORTHLESS! PUT YOUR BACKS IN IT NUMBSKULLS! SATYR! CLEAN YOUR NOSE WITH COCAINE AND AMBROSIA IF YOU NEED, BUT GIVE ME A DIRECTION! MOVE MOVE MOVE!" Having said my piece and having called the demigods back to order, I turned the helm, pointing us west.

"Why are we going west?" Jillian stopped beside me, a binocular pointing towards the horizon.

"Because magic feels denser in that direction, it's almost like seeing a conglomeration of Mist. Then, as a veteran of a quest that involved Ladon, I can testify that 'When in doubt, look for trouble' is a viable strategy. And it is a good direction as any." I answered with a sly smile.

"So we're hoping to be lucky." she summed up, causing my grin to widen.

"Icarus, why we never use the engines?" a male voice asked, approaching from behind me.

"First: because they are for when we need to hightail the fuck out of Scilla and Cariddi." I answered honestly.

"What?" David deadpanned.

"Reason two, the crew needs to listen to the captain, so that when we cross the sirens they'll do as I say and not mutiny." I answered to my First Mate and Chief Engineer.

At his widened eyes, I went on: "Second: because having sex with me isn't a ticket to a paid vacation, Helena and Alexandra need to learn that."

At that, he visibly contained a snort, before nodding thoughtfully.

"Third: Training." I looked ahead, taking notice of our position. I knew, intellectually, that the Pleyads were hot blue and luminous stars that had formed within the last 100 million years, but since my escapade in the garden of the Hesperids, which was also the starting point of the whole 'find the golden fleece' problem, I felt like I could understand and feel more. And since then, the sky had felt more alive and aware, if it was because I had held it or because I spent time getting attuned to (read: shagging) the nymphs of the sunset, I didn't know. Maybe it was a mixture of the two. Why would the sunset be relevant? Because it was the celestial event that came before the night. And Nyx, in the Greek mythology, was not only the 'Night' but the unfathomable, the mysteries which were beyond human understanding, the heritage of a time where the night was dark and full of terrors, of a time when humans had barely tamed fire, and used it to keep themselves safe from both a harsh environment and feral beasts.

"Are you sure you didn't simply want to give your twist to Hartman?" David interrupted my musings.

"That was the fourth reason." I deadpanned, earning myself a laugh.

**KRABOOOM** The thunder rattled my bones.

I took out a little telescope and I berated myself for getting distracted from the sunbathing girls, but hey, apparently they had 'forgotten' their swimsuits. Maybe the wild sex without strings attached had been a theme for the choice of the two Dionysus's daughters, but no more than the eye-candy component had been for the female part of the crew, sure, it had been a secondary trait I had looked for, but an important one nonetheless. *What is the point of organizing your own expedition if you can't have fun while on it?* I shook my head, freeing myself from the distracting images: a fucking storm was in full swing ahead: "Storm incoming on our route! Brace yourselves!" I ordered from my position. And in less than fifteen minutes, we were in full swing of the worst storm the seas had ever seen.

Argo II climbed out of a crashing wave, and in the almost absolute darkness caused by the thick clouds, I saw the waves too close, too tall, too angry. I howled in laughter, almost maniacally, unzipping my raincoat and letting it flap wildly behind me: if the storm wasn't natural, it was the creation of some god. Likely the one who held the title of Stormbringer. So I reached out, feeling my hands on the helm and my feet in my flooded boots. I felt the wind hammering on my face and the rain pelting both me and the ship. And when the next gale came, accompanied by the most titanic wave I had yet seen,

*I pushed back.* I didn't quite tame the storm, not even remotely, but the ship slightly shifted his position, the head pointing straight at the incoming wall of water. We climbed.

We were slower than I would have liked, and once more I despised the name given to the ship, inappropriately as it was at the time.

Never before had I wished so much for the land, to feel the sweet brown soils under my feet. Sand, even rocks. For the first time, I felt the rage within the sea, as if not only the ocean, but the sky too suddenly had chosen to pound the puny humans who dared defy it into nothingness. Not to teach us a lesson, oh no, whatever we could learn from the demonstration of rage the world was providing us with would be on our shoulders. The sky had turned pitch black, swallowed by the endless clouds, a constant gale howling under dark and serious clouds. Yet, the ship had kept going over the watery fists, that perhaps were willed into existence with the intention of causing enough bruising for the sailors to remember the sea's anger, enough for them to start a sweet serenade of sorrow. *I suspected that Poseidon would be opposed to us saving Thalia, after all, Zeus had no problems with throwing bolts at Percy's car when he was running back to camp, and Hades was always ready to unleash hell upon the children of his two brothers. The horde that forced me to leave my first home is proof enough.* I thought sardonically while I held on the helm for dear life. I spat a mouthful of saltwater: "This is getting ridiculous."

But the sea didn't care about casualties, didn't care about who held which title among men. Demigod, sailor, captain, bodyguard, and slave: it didn't matter. All would be swallowed by the waves. We were mentally ready for sudden, violent storms that targeted our ship specifically, even if we knew it would not be natural, it was the nature of the half-metaphysical bullshit we were sailing through. With no warning, total darkness had prevailed as clouds thickened and the sky was stricken, blotting out the moonlight and stars. The wind had arisen to push the once still waters to choppy, which morphed into mountains of angry waves. The demigods had struggled to get the sails down and to tie them in place. They slipped on the rain-soaked deck. Godly blood or not, people were starting to panic. Not I, oh no, I was using my limited influence over the sea to keep us going, and a twist on the Mist to try and soothe the fear of my crew. The wind slammed the rain into our faces like tiny stones and pushed our raincoats' hoods back. The ship ran, first up waves at forty-five degrees, and then crashed down jarring our bones. At one point the waves spun the vessel sideways. We held tightly onto the mast, onto ropes, onto each other, onto anything.

Eric, son of Ares, was an athletic and determined eighteen years old demigod, instead of the bulky build of many of his brothers and sisters, he was short and lean, surprisingly agile, and had a brain between his ears. When the time came to hold down a secondary sail, he flung himself down, wrestling it to the deck, where others managed to tie it. He had barely the time for a shout of defiance to the world, when a wave climbed on the deck and swiped him away, like it was a simple parlor trick. So he fell, to hubris, to a moment of carelessness and to the world's worst storm that I had ever seen.

The waves had grown so large that the vessel was dwarfed, riding up and down the mighty swelling sea like a child's toy. There was no mercy in the wind, no grace in the waves, only wrath, and tempest. The air was thick with a briny mist, the deck awash with salty waves. As the waves rocked the ship almost to a tipping point, everything I was, have been, or ever will be, was concentrated into that tiny string of moments, as if that was the moment in which I was truly born. The wind was strong enough to pick up a man and fling him to the hungry waves, we were forced to take turns on the deck, tying us to the mast with ropes long enough to allow us to move around. Every sense was maxed out, every muscle already working beyond normal capacity and still, there was no end in sight.

There wasn't any more desolate feeling than the mighty swelling of the ocean beneath one's feet and nothing on the horizon but more of the same. In every direction, there was only grey blue black tempest, laced with white, blends into a horizon of the same hue. There is no rescue from land, sea, or air and all anyone could do was give until they are spent.

I narrowed my eyes against the harsh gales: the second mast must have broken during one of the most recent waves and almost fell on someone. *Thank you for the battle-ready reflexes.* Soon another wave climbed its way on the deck and cleaned it. On a few occasions, I had hoped that my life was nothing more than a dream turned nightmare, and more than ever I would give anything to wake up, for the storm to be just a recreation of my synapses, another lesson from my subconscious. But there was no waking up from the nightmare. I could taste the salty air, sharp on my skin, feel the harsh and cold bite of the wind, my heart pumping so furiously that I felt it in my throat. *Should I see tomorrow, it will be with a new nightmare...* I realized, along with the fact that while I had been able to breathe underwater and control the currents into the bay near the Camp, falling out of the ship would mean drowning even for me. It was in the heaviness of the water, in the dampness that I felt on my skin, in the opposition my will was facing while steering the ship.

But there was nothing of Greeks Myths and Magic around us, none of the shining examples of heroism that could carry the world through the apocalypse. Only gray and cold. *We are too slow...*

I hurled back my raincoat's hood with a pensive expression and eyed the ax embedded into the deck, it was still were John had tossed it to cut the sails free in order to avoid the wind dragging the ship for another tango. I watched again the fewer and fewer people on the ship, the hungry sea was enjoying its banquet, slowly eating its way through the crew. It was like it didn't want to immediately sink the ship, preferring to enjoy its meal. *Maybe they are only exhausted in the galley, getting a pick up with ambrosia and nectar.* I calmed myself.

Another thunder rattled my bones, shaking me from my reverie. "What the fuck is up with this storm? It looks alive..."

Then I stopped myself. It could very well be... that the sea, or better, that storm, was alive, hungry and sadistic. It would explain why the waves simply hadn't swallowed us. The promise I had made myself resounded into my mind. **I am free.** And like the thunder around the ship managed to rattle our bones and shake our resolve, the deceptively simple three words gave me strength, resonating too true to be ignored. *I won't bow to this storm.*

And suddenly the choice was very simple. When my tired eyes recognized a yellow raincoat moving around me, I spoke, my words thundering loud enough to be heard: "Hold the helm!" and I dropped off my position, running on the soaked deck until I grabbed the handle of the simple bearded-ax, unhinging it from the wood. Then I ran, cutting with decisive swings the ropes holding captive the sails, which unfurled faster than my eyes could follow them through the rain, the wind almost lifting the ship from the waters. A hand clamped on my shoulder once I made my way towards the helm: "What have you done! The ship will be torn apart, we need to cut away the sails!"

"If we don't ride this storm out, the sea is going to swallow us one after another!" my reply was swift and uncaring, I was the fucking captain, the ship and the crew would heel to my will. And I was unbowed: "Trust in the keel!" I shouted, a manic laugh slipping once more through my lips.

And ride the storm we did. I howled, challenging the waters, the sky, the lightning, the wood of the helm bit deep into my hands, trying to escape control. I wouldn't let it.

I was leading us on the edge of a razor. One misstep was all that was needed for everyone to die.

I was terrified and exalted.

There was no help, no safety net. The option of dropping everything and catching a cab to return to the Camp wasn't there, the small escape rope I had during the quest in Hera's garden was absent, and I felt much more alive because of it.

I was alone, keeping everyone focused on their task while holding onto the helm for dear life.

The lights we set up barely managed to shine through the downpour, seeing the incoming waves was out of the picture, but at least there was a faint white line that followed the bulwark avoided people unknowingly walking in the hungry waves. I pushed and pulled, steering the boat along the raging waters and sneaking out of the avalanches of sea foam that threatened to swallow us whole. Time lost any meaning, as well as direction, there was only the need of riding the waves.

I grabbed the helm, and pulled, carefully balancing between where I wanted to go and where the sea was bringing me, rocketing down the side of the veritable mountain of

water that had just tried to crush us. I led us to ride the winds, the keel cutting the water almost without offering resistance.

I ignored hunger when it came.

I endured the strain of the muscles.

I refused to give in to the killing headache that hammered me every time I closed my eyes.

I was too out of breath to howl my challenging laughter, but I kept grinning like a loon. I drank rain and seawater, washing it down with the nectar I had in my canteen. Finally, like leaving an obscure cave, the ship left the roof made of black clouds, my ears still ringing from the incessant hammering of the thunders. With a start, I recognized that a part of the ringing in my ears was instead a belly laugh, and only after all the others left the galley and looked at me like I was gone off the deep end I realized that I was the one laughing my challenge to sea and sky alike. **I am free.**

And with that realization, I noticed that the sun was climbing up from the East: we drifted on the high of having survived the equivalent of a hurricane in the open sea for several hours before I spotted a single bird descending from the sky. Nobody really noticed, busy as everyone was with either repairs or rest, but I steered us in that direction. Maybe half an hour later, I recognized a spot on the horizon, and led us there unerringly, Ignoring the calls for 'Land-ho!' when they came.

The island was relatively small, just a small amass of woods that signaled the existence of a source of water, but what grabbed my attention was the wailing. It was a desperate sound, the cry of the hopeless, in a rhythm that suggested an almost intermittent pain. We still needed rest, so the ship climbed its way up the sandy beach, and everyone settled down to rest on my orders: "Let's set up a camp and a perimeter, then we can rest. When we gain back some of our strength we'll think about what we can salvage from the island to boosts our reserves, repair the ship, and whatnot."

I landed on the sand with a soft thump accompanied that several other people and walked around the head of the ship, where the violent storm had managed to scratch away the name Argo II. "You are no Argo," I said, remembering the moments during the storm when I wished the ship to sail faster than it did, but in my mind flashed the monumental stress it endured, the blows it survived, the will it defeated: "I dub thee Adámas, unconquerable, invincible. And may you lend your name to the members of the crew."

In the general mutterings of approval, everyone got to work, setting up the tents.

"Chars," I said quietly, causing the satyr to come over to me: "Feel anything?"

I shrugged, looking around and scratching lightly at his still damp beard: "Whatever this wailing is coming from, it has nothing to do with Pan."

"Dead count?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Eric, son of Ares, and Julia, daughter of Athena." he reported with a frown.

"I saw Eric being swept off the deck." I grimaced: "Julia?"

The satyr looked like he was around forty years old, the prominent belly didn't manage to make you ignore the rippling muscles of his arms or his pecs, while the wide shoulders looked like they could hold back the tide. Even so, when I asked, he visibly sagged, shaking his head. I gritted my teeth: "Organize what rites you can, but without bodies... we'll wait on the island for a couple of days, maybe they will end up on the shore."

Once I said my piece, I left, the annoying guilt that tried to climb on me when Thalia became a tree tried again to ensnare me. I picked up a spear from the hull and went into the woods, killing my lunch could help me deal with my simmering rage.

I crept through the undergrowth, getting closer to the origin of the wailing: a wounded animal could mean a predator was around, so in the best situation, I would find an animal ready to be killed, in the worse case, I could burn through some of my anger at having lost two people already. Soon enough, I found myself going uphill, the terrain becoming rocky and lifeless, the trees disappearing one after another. I walked around what was an actual promontory and climbed a relatively low cliff. Once I reached the top, I found a small plateau that surrounded a jagged rock as big as my hut back at the Camp. What was more interesting however, was the man chained to it, and the eagle intent in ripping out his liver.

"I thought you had been freed by Heracles." I blurted out without thinking.

Prometheus gritted his teeth to ignore the pain before grimacing in my direction: "No longer, as you can see."

## **Chapter 11: Father of Mankind**

*Once I reached the top, I found a small plateau that surrounded a jagged rock as big as my hut back at the Camp. What was more interesting however, was the man chained to it, and the eagle intent in ripping out his liver."I thought you had been freed by Heracles." I blurted out without thinking.Prometheus gritted his teeth to ignore the pain before grimacing: "No longer, as you can see."*



Very much like his brother, the Titan cut an impressive figure, even if in a different way. Seven feet tall, black hair buried under grime and blood, skin completely littered with scars. Even forced to stand against the uncomfortable rock, likely shaped to cut into his back, hurting him almost as much as the eagle that was feasting on his liver, his presence was noticeable. Not imposing like Atlas was, but I felt like I already entered a game I didn't know the rules of. While his brother had at least a loincloth covering him, Prometheus had been stripped bare, his only garments were the thick bands of black metal that held him in place.

Still, while I looked with sick fascination at the eagle busy getting its pound of flesh from the Titan, I noticed there was something wrong: he had stopped his wailing. Without really thinking about it, and with the familiarity born from years of practice, I recognized the not-real and not-actually-there dust particles suspended in a ray of sunshine, changing my focus on them, I recognized them as strands of Mist, and wrapped myself in them, masking my presence.

Under the mass of hair that hid his face, the Titan opened a single eye, and even from where I was, I could see its grey color, and shapes... stones being used to sharpen wood, water directed to keep clay malleable, sparks of warmth, inspiration, planning, light in the dark... "You think I can't recognize what I helped create? No power under the sky can hide a mortal from me, not this close, and not in the middle of my punishment." the words ripped me from the images of... progress and technology that I was seeing, rooting me once more on the promontory where the Titan was being punished.

"It's been a long time since a demigod stumbled upon me, tell me, what do you seek? Perhaps we can help each other." Prometheus suggested as if he was sitting in a comfy chair in a study, evaluating this or that trade, no trace of pain could be heard in his voice, only a honest wish to help and be helped in return. Tilting my head and dropping the Mist, I saw that his expression matched his words, at least from what I could observe, the flapping wings of the eagle made difficult taking in his features.

I knew of Prometheus, but I had the feeling that flaunting my knowledge wouldn't unbalance him as much as it did Atlas, they had two vastly different personalities. He wanted to be freed, like his brother did, however in this case I wasn't at risk of taking his place, from whatever bargain we struck that included his freedom, I could only gain something. *Then why do I feel like I am already being played?* I frowned.

"You know what, I'll be back tomorrow, I'm too spent to deal with a Titan right now." I recognized that after the storm I wasn't at 100%, Prometheus took his punishment like a champ since whenever he had been returned to his rock after Heracles freed him the first time. He could wait a couple of days.

While walking back to the camp, I considered the headache that Prometheus would be. Atlas had been relatively easy to push into helping me, but I had a simple request and a

deceptively simple solution. From the stories, I knew that my last mythological problem was in the information business, after all he had instructed Heracles in how to pluck the golden apples in exchange for his freedom. So, our confrontation would turn out to be a trade of sorts, his freedom for what I wished to know, repeating Heracles steps. It had served me well with Atlas.

While I was walking, a sudden shudder among the undergrowth grabbed my attention. From a bush, an animal came forward, eyeing me warily: it was a bulky, massively built suid with short and relatively thin legs. A short and robust trunk, with hindquarters comparatively underdeveloped. The region behind the shoulder blades rose into a hump, while the short neck held up the very large head, which took up one-third of the body's entire length.

The wild beast measured at least a meter in shoulder height and at least two meters and something in length. It was significantly larger than the average boar, and his tusks gleamed sharply in the sunlight that managed to break through the blotched canopy of leaves.

*Really, a boar?* The 'woods' I was walking in were so more by name than by any merit. But whatever my considerations regarding the situation were, they took the backseat in my mind once the beast charged. I waited until he was less than a meter from me before sidestepping, the natural reflexes of a demigod, furtherly honed by training, more than enough to deal with a boar. Said animal was capable of reaching 40 km/h, and his neck easily upturned weights of 50 kg, but after Ladon, I wasn't overly concerned. So I dodged and took a more adequate stance, following the boar as he finished his charge.

As soon as he turned to have another go at me, the spear I had picked up embedded itself into his flank, biting deep.

Half an hour later, I had managed to drag the boar back to the camp, where I was hailed as Prodigious Captain Hunter, and soon enough, all the demigods were huddled in groups of two or three around several small campfires, eating quietly while each one worked through the death of two of our crewmates. I sat with Charles, Jillian, David and Hailey, slowly thinking about my meeting.

"Strange place to find a boar." Chars frowned: "It's not its standard environment."

Jillian snorted: "There is also the fact that we are on an island in the Sea of Monsters, and that we have met 0 monsters so far."

"At least Hannah will drop off your back about the 'disappearing' food." Hailey joked.

I rolled my eyes: "As I've already told her, I don't eat what she doesn't cook. And besides, I'm lucky when it comes to fishing, we didn't risk our reserves, even if someone among us served itself to an extra meal now and then."

David frowned lightly, his form hunching forward: "Returning to... more relevant matters, what did you find? You are not reacting as the boar was the strangest thing happened since we touched land."

Chars nodded, accepting the reasoning of the demigod: "And coincidentally, the wailing stopped. What agonizing beast did you end the life of?"

"Not a beast." I shook my head, looking deeply into the flames, "A Titan, and I didn't kill him."

Jillian cursed under her breath: "It's Prometheus isn't it?"

"Who is that guy?" David frowned, his historical knowledge was a bit lacking, but it was okay, his duties revolved around machines and keeping the demigods on my ship running.

I sighed, pinching my nose. *Story time.*

"After the gods had molded men and other living creatures with a mixture of clay and fire, the two brothers Epimetheus and Prometheus were called to complete the task and distribute among the newly born creatures all sorts of natural qualities." I started to explain: "Epimetheus set to work but, being dimwitted, distributed all the gifts of nature among the animals, leaving men naked and unprotected, unable to defend themselves, and to survive in a hostile world. To counter his brother's stupidity, Prometheus took the fire of creative power from the workshop of Athena and Haephestus and gave it to mankind."

"So... a good guy?" David rose an eyebrow.

I snorted: "That is only a version of it, another places Prometheus as the creator of mankind. Honestly, take whatever you know about him with a pinch of salt. We inherited scheming from him after all."

"Prometheus is also said to have helped in the birth of the my mother, by keeping open the head of Zeus as a fully-formed Athena issued out of the gaping hole in the King's head. The relations went well between Zeus and Prometheus in the beginning. However, as men on the Earth multiplied and prospered, aided by Prometheus who had given them fire and many beneficial arts, Zeus became concerned about their growing power." Jillian continued the story, looking around skittishly, like she was about to be struck by lightning.

I nodded, surprised by her knowledge: "The anger of Zeus against mankind, and their helper Prometheus, was first aroused when the latter duped the King of the gods into choosing the worst part of a sacrificial bull. Prometheus wrapped the bones of the slain bull in fat while he covered the best part, the flesh, with the intestines. Zeus unknowingly chose the fat-covered heap of bones, while the flesh wrapped in the

intestines was given to hungry men. That is why mankind used to sacrifice the bones to the gods."

I rolled my shoulders, thinking again at the image of the Titan chained to the rock: "Zeus, in revenge, withheld fire, the most necessary element of civilization, from humankind, putting them to untold miseries. However, Prometheus soon came to our help. He stole fire from the workshop of Hephaestus, the god of fire and patron of artisans and craftsmen, and passed it, hidden in a stalk of fennel, on to humankind."

"So he is good. Right?" David was reasonably confused.

"He is self-serving. He was the one to tell Hercules how to trick Atlas in order to obtain the golden apples of immortality, in exchange of being freed." I shook my head.

"So..." Jillian frowned: "Why is he still chained if he has been freed before?"

"Chiron died a long time ago, in fact, he is a constellation." I rolled my eyes: "Some shit does not make sense, I'm guessing that Olympus can pull some strange shit sometimes. In any case, I'll go and see if he knows something interesting, keep this for yourselves, nobody is to leave the camp, and everyone is to stay away from the promontory."

Hailey rose an eyebrow while turning towards me: "No offense, captain, but I'm pretty curious to see a Titan in a safe environment."

I leveled her a cold stare: "I met **Atlas**. I chatted with him, back during the last mission." I rolled my shoulders, trying to untie them from the stiffness that overcame them at the memory of holding the sky: "There is no such a thing as a 'safe Titan'."

"Now you *have* to tell us that story!" Jillian ordered, but she had a playful smile on her face, so I didn't feel guilty when I shook my head and returned to my meal.

After the late lunch, I dropped down in the shade cast by the ship, the cool water of the sea submerging me up to my knees with each wave, and fell in a blissful sleep, like most of my crew.

When I assumed was hours later, given the fact that the sun was setting, I awoke to the sound of Hailey calling for me. I left my relaxing spot, ignoring the wet sand clinging to me and the sun's rays that still felt like they belonged to a much more tropical weather: "What's up?" I asked once I climbed back on the deck.

And I knew the answer before Hailey could manage to explain it. With a defiant expression, a ten years old Annabeth was glaring at me. And my headache became much worse.

*I can't deal with her and Prometheus both.* I sighed: "Jillian!"

When the demigoddess left the hull and her eyes found her sister, her expression soured, her eyes gaining a steely glint. "Take care of your sister, will you? I'm sure you can keep her busy enough that she can't figure out a way to kill herself because of the stupidity born from believing herself too smart for her own good."

Once the sun went down, I saw the eagle rise towards the heavens, its task for the day completed, I left the camp and made my way towards the chained Titan.

Under the moonlight, the small plateau and its prisoner looked extremely different from the image of controlled pain I had observed during the day. Prometheus, bound as he was to his rock, with the pale light casting misty shadows from his brow which looked almost like a crown, his half lidded eyes giving off a faint glow: he looked like a king holding court.

"Walk forward, mortal, I hope that now you are strong enough to talk with me, even if I fear that I can't properly greet you." He chuckled quietly.

"Hercules freed you. Every story matches it." I wondered out loud.

Prometheus sighed dejectedly, completely changing his tune: "In the same way your Chiron is a constellation, perhaps? I only know that there is no easy escape from the judgment of the King of Olympus."

"And you stopped your wailing as soon as I entered your... cell?" I felt walking forward, before sitting on the ground less than three meters from the Titan.

"How much weight can you put on someone's shoulders before its growth becomes irrelevant? How long can pain overcome one's mind before it becomes irrelevant?" he tilted his head: "Adapting is the heart of progress, I am more than simply acquainted with both."

I sighed, eyeing with mistrust the figure crowned with shade cast by the moonlight: "You'll want to be free, no doubt."

The grim smile I received in return was the only answer I needed: "But what you'll do with your freedom concerns me. Nobody really likes the King of the Gods, but whatever revenge you wish to enforce would surely bring with it calamity and open war, of which I need neither."

"Why are you here then?" his voice wasn't as deep and commanding as Atlas' one had been, it had a... liquid quality to it, almost like warm honey.

*Because I'm curious. I suppressed that thought. Because I imagine that chains capable of holding a Titan can be recycled for annoying gods...* I pushed that to the back of my

mind, choosing instead to redirect the conversation: "Do you know where Pandora's box is? I'm looking for Elpis."

"I could find it." the Titan nodded: "If you were actually looking for it, that is. Why don't you tell me what you're actually looking for?"

I was annoyed by his finding out that I lied in half a second, but transaction worked in two ways... what could I ask for? A way to navigate the Labirynt? A map towards the Golden Fleece? Kidnapping a clear sighted mortal didn't sound so difficult, and if Polyphemus abitually ate satyrs, Chars would lead us there ecentually. I wasn't looking for anything the Titan could offer me. I chose a shot in the dark: "What do you know of other pantheons?"

I had the feeling it was a topic that the ruling class of gods would have disliked ( for fear of the competition ), and going on my own looking for other cultures' deites sounded a one way tivket towsrds an horrible death.

The Titan recoiled in distaste: "You ask for something not meant to be known,either by God, Titan, Giant or Mortal." I shrugged, not feeling exactly apologetic.

"I can offer my help in your quest, demigod." Prometheus said trying to make it sound like it was some kind of big deal. "As a rule, I don't strike pacts with people trickier than me." I snorted, I was just as surprised as he was, that a demigod had nothing to ask to an immortal... it didn't happen often. Besides, I had a general idea about how to recover the Golden Fleece and how to find the 'last message' of Pan, I didn't want any more help on that front. I wanted Thalia healed, sure, but neither of the purposes of my trip were going anywhere.

"Simple gifts for simple minds." the Titan grumbled, his tone souring a bit: "You are far from being simple." he tilted his head, studying my wary form. "You met my kin before." he stated, and in his words there was no doubt or uncertainty, my lack of reaction apparently egging him on: "And considered the lack of Tartarus' shade over your eyes, the list narrows considerably."

A loopsided grin found its way on my face: "**Atlas** is well, if that is your roundabout way to ask after family."

The eyes of the Titan widened, a smile that had no business being so carefree answering my words: "Skyholder." he accused me, causing me to bow my head mockingly.

"Yet, you've still nothing to offer." I laid back on the plateau, my weight resting on my elbows, so that my eyes could go from the chained immortal to the cloudless sky: "I won't deny that freeing you intrests me, I'd like to see what events would follow, but for now, the King's benevolence is one of the few things that stills the hand of the Council."

Perceiving Prometheus' curiosity more than actually seeing it on his face, I elaborated: "I kicked Delphi's Oracle, and I've been less than... respectful, with the Queen."

The laugh of the Titan was heart-warming: "We are more alike than I suspected then."

"If what you say is true, then why did you go against his will and gave fire to mankind?" I was actually interested, I sure as hell wasn't the generous, philanthropic sort.

The answer came with a decisiveness and certainty that I didn't expect: "Because I could. Because the current King is an upstart who forgot his place a long time ago. And because without many looking the other way, he would have been found while hiding with his goat Amalthea..." he shook his head: "Because for all the immortals' boasting, I could tell the magnitude of what men could build, could understand, could dream. When Coeus confirmed my intuition... I couldn't just let it be."

*Because I could.* I repeated to myself, finding that the words actually made sense. I stole from mortals for the same reason, for the same reason I hit the Oracle, and I refused to sacrifice shit to Poseidon before our travel because I could survive it, and my crew could either adapt or die.

"Just because you can do a thing, does not always mean you should. Do you have no better reason for acting than follow your impulses?" I snorted: "Coeus represented rational intelligence, he hardly qualifies as someone who knows Fate, betting on his words..."

The Titan laughed: "I am *pro*-before and *methos*-learning! Forethought is right up my alley, but you're right, foresight it's not." He glanced at the sky, taking in the countless stars: "I cannot say, I can only imagine consequences of what I see, very much like you do, we both know that the vaster an event see, the clearer the trame of the world becomes, I knew when my brother failed to gift appropriate traits to mankind that I had to do his part, and that it would be too much."

He shook his arms, the chains rattling against the rock with a dull clang: "Even those who ride the currents of Time cannot see past Time's end... The King's father has always been dangerous, and it's by his design that even those who try to hasten the end, may delay it, while those who work to delay the end, may bring it closer, as *he* did when he devoured his sons."

Neither of us spoke the name Kronos out loud, but we both knew who we were referring to: "You may have an inkling as why I don't want you gallivanting around, picking up the pieces."

Prometheus was more amused than enraged by seeing his chance at freedom turn into smoke with my words: "So you *do* have a way to see what is yet to happen. But who guides your knowledge? Surely not the Sun's god, I saw how his rays despised you when you came during the day..."

I blinked, realizing that I had left many secrets out for him to pick up. *That's it.* While it was undoubtedly interesting chatting with a Titan, I was in no position to help him, nor I was gaining anything from our midnight chat. There was no objective, nothing to gain, no reason to act, or to try and outwit him.

"*He* took domination as his birthright, after he fell Uranous... his sickle was dangerous for every being, and many feared to fall when time for the harvest came..." Prometheus shook his head: "He was the first cause of his own undoing, be careful, mortal that you not do the same."

With those ominous words, I chose to leave the Titan to his prison and walked back to the camp. *Well, it has been underwhelming.*

"It would be almost effortless for you to free me. These chains are just strong enough that I can't overcome them alone, you could grant me my freedom with a simple tug, surely it's not too much to ask?" He tried to rekindle my interest, but I kept walking.

"I have much to offer for very little in exchange, if it's not an artifact that you seek, perhaps a gift would interest you more?" His words reminded me that he had an important role in the birth of Pandora, the first mortal woman, *Pan*-all *Dōron*-gift, it was... an opportunity? Maybe, but I had the feel that asking for something out of greed would only bite me in the ass further down the line.

23 October 2000

During the past days, David organized the demigods, cutting down trees, drying the wood with an improvised press, shaping new planks to substitute the broken ones, while Hannah, Demeter's daughter, found herself busy carving vines and leaves out of our new mast. If art was her way to face the almost panic that keeping travelling the Sea of Monsters entailed, nobody pointed it out.

I was trying to not take Annabeth in my own hands, I couldn't be bothered and I was busy figuring out the whys and hows of our situation. Still, I saw her skittering around after Jillian, who was keeping to her task with a zeal I didn't suspect she had in her.

With a sigh, I went back to my thoughts: the rest of the woods was suspiciously devoid of animals. No foxes, wolves, boars, squirrels. Now the real question was: how did the first boar managed to land on the island just in time for me to kill it? The obvious answer was clearly divine intervention, which brought up another query: why would Ares send his sacred animal to be eaten by demigods?

Did he approve our mission? If yes, why? I refused to forget that Ares was the god of War, as such he liked a very specific set of things, none of which I wanted to touch with a ten foot pole.



24 October 2000

The day we were ready to set sail, I was trying to kill my headache with sheer force of will, since once more I had been forced to postpone our leaving the small island. With the dawn, an eagle had descended from the sky, only to fly away immediately after.

That caused me to run to the promontory, where I looked dejectedly at the black chains still hanging from the rock, taking in the conspicuous absence of their prisoner, and sighed.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what happened, not when Annabeth's smug expression was clearly visible in my mind. *I'm surprised I didn't see this coming.* I reprimanded myself.

Events didn't happen without cause, not while walking between mythology and reality. Every action was part of a bigger flow that ended up being Fate, it was obvious to me that for all my **I am free**, the chains around me were still too strict.

Challenges were not random, the sirens tested Ulysses curiosity, forcing him to make use of his wit to listen to them and ensure his own and his crew's survival. My trying to circumvent Luke's choice for his quest ended up with me finding an important part of myself while holding the sky and ended up with Thalia as a tree. Every element had consequences, and they never ended up not causing something relevant.

After the storm we boarded the first island we met, where I found Prometheus, but I refused any kind of exchange. Not freeing him, not giving him earth shattering revelations nor receiving secrets in return.

I avoided the 'challenge' the 'focal event' of the island, not interacting with the flow of Fate. And Annabeth did it in my stead.

*I never really understood the term problem-child until now.* I sighed again.

## **Chapter 12: What do I say to Death?**

### **WHAT DO I SAY TO DEATH?**

24 October 2000

The weather was strangely quiet, and there weren't visible dangers ready to swallow us, so I was granted a reprieve from having to hold the helm with obsessive caution. *Duty or pleasure?* I asked myself, and after a brief consideration, I chose the first.

I walked back inside the ship and walked into a room we had repurposed for Annabeth's 'punishment'.

I nodded to Emily, the daughter of Ares who was reading a book in a corner of the room: "I'll take this watch." I said while sitting on another chair and looking at the ten years old that hadn't stopped the mechanical movements of her detention. In the roughly square room, besides a couple of chairs and a small table, there were two bathtubs, placed one over the other. The upper one had holes on its bottom, so that when water was poured into it, it trailed down into the bottom tub. Annabeth was busy with a bucket, taking water from the tub at her feet and pouring it in the upper one.

All in all, it was a good exercise for tights, back and arms, and the water sloshed just enough that she had to be careful to not spill it around. At the same time, it was a mindnumbing task of terrifying implications: it was clear that her actions were not helping in any way our mission, that she was wasting her time, and also the time of whatever demigods had to keep watch to ensure she was attending her duties.

"Intelligence is useful, but not when it gives you tunnel vision." I started, noticing that Annabeth started grinding her teeth. I really disliked the idea of playing responsible adult in any kind of situation, it was a pointless hassle, but the demigoddess was 10 years old, I couldn't honestly expect her to figure out the magnitude of her fuck up on her own.

When she kept attending to her task in stubborn silence, I went on, knowing that in the sheer boredom imposed by her punishment, every one of my words would at least be listened to as a distraction, if nothing else: "Wisdom is the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment."

As she bristled I withheld an exasperated sigh: "You have brains, nobody doubts it, you've been birthed with those. But, and I say it without any ill will, you're 10 years old. As such, whatever choice you make in the real world tends to be a dumb one."

When she whipped her head towards me with an outraged expression, I simply pointed at the tubs, causing her to return to work with a snarl: "Chiron doesn't allow demigods under 12 to undertake quests. You ignored the experience and evaluation of an immortal who has been dealing with demigods going on almost suicide missions since at least 8th century Before Christ, which is the date of the earliest proof of Greek civilization."

I dismissed whatever she was mumbling under her breath and carried on: "Instead of sticking close with your brothers and sisters, with your friends, with Luke, you chose to join a group of people you don't know. And you also did it as a clandestine, stealing resources that you can't pay back with any kind of work, thusly damaging the chances of success of the mission."

"I can help! I figured out..." she stopped protesting with a startled jump when my palm slammed flat against the table, cutting her off with a loud bang: "Trust and discipline are of fundamental importance on a ship, especially when we don't know how long we'll be

at sea. Since you came on board in secret, and hid yourself for all the duration of the trip, there is no trust."

"So I can't assign you any kind of task, or leave you unsupervised." my voice remained calm and level for the whole exchange, and I saw that the logically structured speech was being followed: "Gallivanting around an island you had no information of and not reporting your finding of a Titan to the crew clearly displayed a lack of whatever respect for hierarchy you should have. And it stated again that you don't trust anyone in this ship."

She flinched minutely at my words, she was smart enough that even at her young age, she could follow my reasoning, even if she still believed she acted in the best interests of everybody: "And to cap it all, during your personal crusade against my evil-ness, you freed Prometheus, and make no mistake: you dragged on us the displeasure of the King of the gods, which is the least important consequence, all for information that I already had."

She dropped her bucket and tried to stare me down: "You don't know! Prometheus told only me and..."

"And the satyr will sooner or later smell the distinctive magic of the Golden Fleece, leading us to Polyphemus' cave, where he will ambush us." I completed for her, causing her jaw to drop slightly and her voice to abandon her.

I rose from my seated position and walked toward the ten years old girl, who looked... lost, for lack of a better expression: "If you unwillingly stomp a venomous snake you get bitten, intentions are relevant, but they rarely affect the consequences of your actions."

I squeezed her shoulder and left the room after having watched carefully her shifting expression. I wasn't going to drop on her the resurrection of Kronos, that had likely been anticipated because of her stunt, she was a ten years old girl with a superiority complex, her punishment would highlight her uselessness on the trip while our chat would drive home the point that she wasn't all-knowing. Telling a ten years old girl that he's useless isn't really conducive to any form of improvement, but showing a ten years old demigoddess capable of sneaking on my ship that she had to rely on others looked like a better alternative. It wasn't like I could execute or beat a child for wanting to help her friend-turned-tree, and I couldn't just drop her off or bring her back to camp.

A few minutes later, I joined David in the workshop where he could build the machines necessary to the ship on the fly, and reached his body, slumped on a chair in front of a desk where thick, black chains were resting.

"What do you make of them?" I asked, eyeing them warily.

The son of Hephaestus turned to look at me, revealing deep bags under his eyes and a tired expression: "I'd need a proper forge to find their melting point, I couldn't cut away

a single shard to figure out the material under a microscope, I don't..." He stopped, taking a deep breath and centering himself, before poking with a screwdriver at the pieces of dark stone we had to break off from the giant boulder where Prometheus was bound: "Can we use it as it is? Yes. Do *I* know what this shit is? No."

I nodded, thinking about how we could use chains just strong enough to bind the last Titan I met: "Go to sleep, you'll need it."

### 31 November 2000

The reckon team was composed of four members, optimizing the strength of numbers with the speed that a small group could use to cross a wide area. Accompanying me there was Charles, our resident satyr, Hailey, daughter of Hermes and our best sneak, and finally Sofia, who acted as our ranged fighter and healer both. The island was... strange, there was no other way to describe it. We all knew that in the Sea of Monsters matters like common sense and logic didn't work properly, not when facing the unnaturalness of mythology. While the island where we had found Prometheus had a temperate climate, we were now finding our way through some kind of marsh-swamp hybrid.

We had reached the island with the dawn, crossing a heavy fog that had clung to us like some creepy type of spiderweb, I wouldn't have wished to make land, but an occasion to replenish our reserves on 'dry' land couldn't be ignored, while Charles had felt '*something*' in the inland. I couldn't exactly refuse him, besides, while finding the Golden Fleece had been my excuse for the expedition, another was that I could ill-tolerate the atmosphere at the Camp, and adventure called for everyone, not only myself.

The wetland was an area of land where water covered the ground for long periods of time. Unlike the swamps sections of the island, which were dominated by trees, the marsh was dominated by grasses and other herbaceous plants. We were treading through some kind of herbaceous plant that reached up to our chest, and we were flanking the swamp proper. I wasn't an expert on biodiversity, but I would have thought that at least *some* animals should have lived in the area. For the last hour, we had met none: "Chars, are we going into the scary looking swamp?" Sofia asked with a frown. The sun may have been high in the sky, but the damp mist surrounding us hadn't lifted, making her a bit jumpy.

The satyr nodded silently, keeping his eyes peeled onwards until we crossed the first mangrove trees: "Careful now, the snakes may look like roots." he warned us in a bland tone before walking forward. The swamp was dominated by cypress, hardwood, and mangrove trees. The area was neither totally land nor totally water, and forced us to look carefully before each step, and our focus cut into our usually cheerfully chatty demeanor, leaving us in an eerie silence. From time to time we met bare flats of mud and sand that were thinly covered by seawater. My eyes picked up crabs, conchs, and other shellfish, while my ears spotted a fluttering of wings from time to time, signaling that at least

some birds had followed their nature, eager to eat easy prey. An occasional gleam underwater dragged my eyes over scales that belonged to either small fishes or snakes. But that caused my hairs to stand up straight on my arms: every animal looked almost... *careful*, almost scared to move clumsily and cause some kind of noise. *Now that I think about it the animals are running away from us.* "Let's keep it quiet, Charles take point, Sofia, behind me, Hailey, can you move among the branches?" While I whispered my orders I untied the sword from my waist, eyeing approvingly when everybody followed my commands.

We moved cautiously, and soon enough we came into the swamp equivalent of a large clearing, and the mist was only a thin veil over the surface of the water, like some kind of shapeshifting lid pulled over a secret. We spread among the roots and the lower branches of the trees, mindful of our steps. In the silence, Charles' warning came too late: "We're attacked!"

In a flash of gray-green scales and an unholy mix of hissing and growling, a giant snake-like monster was on us, teeth as long as my arm slick of a black like substance, with proportionate heads and slitted eyes of a poisonous yellow: all in all, a promise of a horrible death. I jumped back among the roots just above the water and ran around a tree, spying the beast from the relative safety of behind a trunk.

As soon as I took an actual look to the whole monster trashing in the clearing my blood ran cold: the resemblance to Ladon was there, if only for the multiple heads, even if these had a more serpentine-like shape than the clearly draconic ones of the Warden of the Golden Apple Tree. Where Ladon maws hosted an impressive row of teeth, its heads had square jaws and horns, our current enemy instead sported heads that followed a more triangular shape, and rows of needle-like fangs. *The fucking hydra!* I cursed under my breath, before warning the others: "Deadly venom! Don't let yourself be bitten, and don't cut off the heads, they'll just grow back twice as many!"

I heard the dismayed answers of my team while I called upon the Mist, shrouding myself in it and tossing myself back into the clearing. The Hydra, also called the Lernean Hydra, in Greek legend was the offspring of Typhon and Echidna, a gigantic water-snake-like monster with nine heads. The monster's haunt was the marshes of Lerna, near Árgos, from which he periodically emerged to harry the people and livestock of Lerna. Anyone who attempted to behead the Hydra found that as soon as one head was cut off, two more heads would emerge from the fresh wound. Heracles defeated it having someone cauterizing the necks after he severed the heads. My mind quickly thought about how to replicate the hero's quest.

Balancing myself on unstable roots wasn't easy, and I was too low on the surface of the water to keep track of my team, even if I could see the effect of their attacks: Charles was likely the one responsible for the ensnaring branches that distracted or tried to stop the monster, while arrows occasionally managed to embed themselves into an eye here and there, Hailey was doing her best to simply avoiding being bit off in half. She was nimble enough for it, even if her knife and sword were less than useful in arming the monster.

In a reckless act that I executed only because my brain was operating too slowly for me to survive following its directions, I jumped, landing on the slightly slimy back of the giant nine-headed beast. As three of the heads turned towards me hissing in outrage at the weight they felt, I stabbed my sword in what I hoped was the spine of the beast, the celestial bronze blade sinking with some resistance through the scales. While one of the three heads reeled back in pain, the other two lunged forward me, fangs snapping at the empty space I left behind after I rolled off its side. Just as my feet landed precariously on the roots over the muddy water, the Hydra's body twitched, bludgeoning me through the clearing and against a tree.

I wheezed, cursing mentally as the air left my lungs. I couldn't stop to evaluate my situation, as the two heads had no problem in following my impromptu flight and were already closing in on me. I finished sliding down on the trunk with my back, and as soon as I had some kind of leverage I tossed myself aside, rolling on the uneven net of knotted roots, likely Charles was doing his best to create some kind of surface for us to stand on, showing that his experience as a Seeker was enough to allow him to keep his head: "Sofia!" I managed to shout, "Send a warning to the others, then prepare the incendiary arrows!"

Trusting her to recognize my order and pull back from the fight until she was ready to complete it, I let myself fall into the fight once more into myself, picking the options offered by my instinct as an expert guitarist could choose a string over another while improvising. Teachings about sword and shield slowly slid off me, leaving me with only my gut as a guide.

Instead of worsening my performance, I became much ...*more*. Faster, stronger, less predictable. Like when I had fought seriously against Thalia, I went all out after months of carefully managing my strength, my power. I had left behind staff, spear, shield, ax, and sword, everything was just another way to push forward in an unrelenting, battering attack, or retreating with the swiftness of a leaving wave.

Distractedly, I kept a track of my surroundings and of my team, but it was of secondary importance. *It's lucky that I left Adamas while geared up for war.* I admitted to myself. The shaft of my spear had broke as soon as I tried to use it to redirect the impact of one bite, the round shield on my back had managed to lessen some of the impacts I hadn't managed to avoid, but from his lumpy feeling, I could tell that he was hammered in in several places, the sword I had managed to land some actual injuries with hadn't been dulled by the venom, but I couldn't risk getting a single drop of it on my skin: it acted only on organic matter, but I remembered that Hercules had been killed by it, and while I had actually outlasted the fucker in holding up the sky, I *really* didn't want to test myself against the cause of his death.

While all those considerations rolled together in a maelstrom in the back of my head, I somersaulted over the Hydra's sweeping tail and behind one of its heads, like a waver rolling over a rock, and slashed with the sword, having care of keeping the swing going so that the venom wouldn't land on me. The tip of the blade cut about twenty centimeters

into the neck of the beast, apparently severing just enough muscles that the head dipped down, but not enough to trigger the regrowth of another couple of the heads.

"I'm ready Icarus!" Sofia's voice seemed to come from another world as I kept the momentum of my swing in order to slam the flat of the blade against the teeth of another head that was trying to bite me. I jumped back, running down the twitching neck of the almost severed head in a feat of balance that I didn't think myself capable of: "Hailey run towards the ship and tell them we're facing the Hydra, they need to stay out of the fight, only long-range support!" I shouted jumping down one side and landing again on roots that buckled under my weight but didn't snap. I jumped, rolled, and changed my direction no less than 4 times in the following three seconds, gaining some measure of breathing room from the rampaging monster while the eight heads still capable of a complete range of movement hovered confused over the not that couldn't get back up.

"Sofia! When I cut off one head, I want you to immediately rain fire on it, Charles, I need ground as steady as you can make it!" And I launched myself back into the fray, knowing that my movements recalled the sea, the rhythm mimicking the up and down of the waves, alternating times in which I kept attacking to periods during which I stood on the defensive, behaving like waves during the storm that tried to sink the Adamas.

I made sure my shield was secured on my back and covered the otherwise exposed back of my neck, and as I charged, the muddy water answered to my call almost as the currents did back in the Camp's bay. My right hand slid upwards on the broken shaft of the spear I recovered while running, and I threw it like a javelin, hoping that it would land into an eye of the beast. While the improvised weapon flew, brown water exploded like a geyser between me and the Hydra, making it so that it couldn't see me while I manipulated the Mist. As I spun my illusions, the tentative hold I had on the waters of the swamp died, but what I had managed had been enough.

The eight heads still capable of moving lunged forward, two of each targeting a different generic greek soldier I shaped out of thin air. In the moments while my instincts receded I could take a proper look at the beast: of its eight heads, two had arrows' shafts sprouting from both of their eyes, while another two had a single working eye. Even before I had given my orders, Sofia had been far from foolish enough to strike the thick scales of the beast. In the moments I had thusly gained, I fished out a lighter from my pocket and with it, I lit up the venom that coated my sword, grinning when a sickly looking green fire that spat an oily looking dark-green smoke climbed on the blade. *In the stories a simple torch had been used to cauterize the beheading, but how could a torch have the time to act on a beast that has no intention of staying still?* My intuitive jump had been a shot in the dark, but for once I was happy that it had actually worked.

I held my breath as I closed in on one of the heads that still had both of its eyes, and wrapped another layer of Mist around me, making sure to cover smell and sound along with sight. With quick steps as quiet as I could make them, I moved in a pattern that kept me out from the battle going on between the confused heads and my illusions. My target lunged for a fake soldier that fell on its knee when I made it do so, and my sword fell in

a lightning fast slash. As the blade cut through the monster, the exposed parts of its insides caught fire like they were running on petrol.

Instead of retreating and planning a new attack, I pushed forward, taking another step and letting my instinct surface: a second sweep took down the closest head, that had lunged with its twin towards its target. As the illusions withered and disappeared, I jumped back, my sword being plunged into the water and putting out the fire so that I could take a deep breath without risking breathing the poisonous fumes.

*One head unable to rise, two more are gone.* I counted, there were still six to be removed and cauterized, and with that thought in mind, I dug into myself and brought forward that unrelenting fury that only a storm out at sea could properly embody, turning my arms into whirlpools ready to redirect whatever came into their range, my legs gained the strength of a deep current, and I wielded the strength of the tides.

I moved on the left of the confused monster, closing in to one of the heads that still had both eyes working, twisting my torso as I let the momentum make my left hand slid down the handle of the sword, allowing me that tiny increase in range sufficient to rip through an eye otherwise out of my reach. I slid a shield off my back and held on my left arm and slammed it against another head, and low boom resonated in the swamp as the beast recoiled in rage, and another head slammed against my shield immediately later, causing me to lose my footing as I was once more flung into the muddy waters amongst the mangroves' roots. The water moved following my will, allowing me to move as I couldn't have done otherwise, nimble and quick, I found again my footing as I emerged from beneath the water, like some strange mixture of The Thing and a Moss-covered patch of ground.

Once more I took a deep breath and took a step back from the churning power inside me and looked at the situation with a clear head, once more reaching to the Mist and hiding myself from view as other greek soldiers appeared out of nowhere walking on the waters towards the Hydra, who was eyeing them suspiciously, sniffing the air or tasting it with its tongues looking for me.

Again, I crept forward avoiding the area where the heads were pointlessly trying to eat my illusions, that moved with impossible speed just out of the beast's way. Once more, I attacked when a head lunged: "Now Sofia!" the invisibility over me broke as the intent behind my shout opposed the will to hide intrinsic of the Mist's manipulation. As the arrow landed on the wound and set it on fire, I rammed my bent shield against a blind head, forcing it back and slashed with the sword in my hand as another head decided that I was a priority. I raised the sword over my head and hit with the flat of the blade the incoming head, immediately severing it an instant after: "Again!" I called for Sofia and laughed in joy as a second flaming arrow landed on the target.

*One head unable to rise, four gone and five to go.* I counted with glee, jumping back and repeating my assault, empowered by the sea. I was far from being able to exercise the kind of absurd shit Percy Jackson had shown by the end of the books, but a simple



reinforcement of my body's capabilities was something I was able to do. It had to be a conscious effort on my part, unlike Thalia's way of doing it. I repeated the previous sequence of attack and defense, again and again, taking out one head at a time and waiting for Sofia to cauterize it before passing to the next. My arms soon felt like lead and every breath came out as a ragged rasp, the illusions I usually had no problems crafting out of Mist soon became difficult details that escaped my thoughts, fraying themselves and falling apart as soon as I stopped dedicating all of my focus to it.

That meant that as I had to face the last two heads, I was pretty much out of juice.

I stood on the roots, waiting for it to come closer, and appreciating Charles effects on the branches like never before, as they swayed over its last eye and allowed me to stay out of sight. There were only two heads left, only one of which still had eyes. Luckily enough it was the head with limited mobility, but sadly the Hydra had apparently figured out how to manage a shared field of sight.

My head dipped slightly, as I felt exhaustion kicking in with a vengeance, and I started to see the world as from the bottom of a well. I blinked blearily through the dusty feeling that was trying to force my eyes closed, distractedly deciding to take stock of my situation. An uncomfortable pressure made itself known in my side, and as I lowered my unfocused eyes, I saw that a branch had buried itself in my back and was proudly sprouting out from my belly.

"ADAMAS!" With that war cry, demigods, swarmed the clearing, arrows pelting the still working eyes of the monster and jars of terracotta exploding against its skin, unleashing greek fire like confetti.

With that last image not making sense in my mind, I lost my last grasp on consciousness.

## **Chapter 13: No Fairness In Death**

### **NO FAIRNESS IN DEATH (OR SLEEP)**

#### **ANNABETH POV**

Icarus had forbidden me from leaving the Adamas. I couldn't believe it. *How can he?* I got it, I had messed up, but it was *months* before! Since then I had been on my best behaviour, I listened, I learned, and I even forced myself to stop before pointing out when someone was doing something stupid. *Luke wouldn't have left me to rot.* I thought bitterly.

I sighed, once more going over the knots that I had been assigned to learn: "The Bowline, also known as the king of knots, has multiple purposes aboard ship. A bowline creates a fixed loop on the end of a rope and is used for hitching, mooring and lifting. Because it tightens when stressed, the knot gets tighter when pulled. The bowline is tied by forming a loop, bringing the free end of the rope to pass through the eye, wrapping the rope around the standing line and back down through the loop before tightening." my hands ran over the rope as I enunciated the correct procedure to craft said knot, and in less than ten seconds, it was ready.

I sighed, before undoing it and passing to the next of my list: "The clove hitch is often used for tying something up temporarily, often attaching a rope to a pole or stanchion. The clove hitch is formed by hanging the rope around the support and creating a loop, passing the rope from behind and tightening to form a knot." and once more my hands followed the motions that I had spent days to learn, flawlessly crafting the knot.

Once more, I undid it and passed to the next, all the while explaining to the air what my hands were doing: "The round turn and two half-hitches is used for holding mooring lines by fastening a rope to a fixed object such as a post, ring or tree. The round turn and two half-hitches are created by wrapping the end of a rope around the support and taking it around the standing end of the rope. Another turn is made before taking the end of the rope out of the loop."

I sighed tiredly and *dropped* the piece of rope with disgust: "I swear, if I have to prepare a single other knot, I'll scream!" then the unthinkable happened: a hand landed over my head and ruffled my hair! *Who is the idiot that soon will find himself with a stump at the end of the arm?* I whirled on myself and snarled at my assailant, my hand already unsheathing the knife that Luke had gifted me.

"Whoah kid, no spilling blood in the galley, you know how Hannah gets when dealing with hygiene." The unbearably calm and unconcerned voice of David made me unconsciously sag my shoulders. *Maybe cutting him would make him remember to keep his grease-stained hands to himself!* My free hand rose tentatively to check my hair, finding it clean from whatever disgusting waste the son of Hephaestus usually tinkered within the engines' room. My surprise momentarily stopped me from giving him a proper tongue lashing, and it must have shown on my face since he hunched forward me, grinning like a loon: "Hannah had me scrub my hands raw the last time I came in here with a tiny smudge on them, you pretty blond hair is safe."

*My hair is pretty?* I asked myself, not that I could care less: "Yes, well, keep your hands to yourself anyway, thank you very much!" I hissed threateningly.

"You're welcome." he nodded seriously before walking towards the fridge and taking out some fish soup of the day before and chucking the whole thing in the microwave.

"Welcome?" I repeated, *Gods this is so frustrating I was being sarcastic!* "That is the part you focus on? Not me threatening you with a knife?"

"You'll be more intimidating in a few years kid, give it time, for now... well, you're just adorable, one of my sisters would have built a robot-teddy bear of you, by now." David answered, causing me to grab the rope I had previously thrown un the floor and toss it in his bowl of fish soup, forcing him to scamper to make sure it didn't fall in. *I'm not adorable, I'm scary! I am a genius daughter of Athena!* I growled and turned to leave the galley. *Some fresh air will make sure I don't kill him in the Galley.* I thought to myself, it would upset Hannah anyway, and she had a way to look at you making you feel sorry for being alive that I couldn't quite explain.

Then the bell resonated on the deck, making me run faster up the stairs and reach the rendezvous point, where Hailey of all people was panting out warnings to Charlotte, a daughter of Ares, who was already sporting the bloodthirsty grin that she and her siblings had clearly inherited by their godly father: "Ok, we're dealing with a giant snake, multiple heads, venomous. Emily!" She concluded her speech with a shout to her sister.

The demigoddess in question was already geared up with a couple of spears held in her hand, a giant round shield on her back and a sword to her hip: "Yes?"

"Ask David for some fire, then lead the others, I set up traps for a big ass snake on the way, if you have to retreat try to have it flail around!" Charlotte quickly rattled off, just as Jillian started shaking her head: "No, David and his sister can set up the traps, Emily and Charlotte you two are with me, we'll charge on one side as soon as we approach, Abigail pick up ambrosia and your bow, we'll need it."

As she was talking she reached the side of the ship, pulling a bag over her shoulder which had Φωτιά printed on the side. My eyes read 'fire' without stumbling, and I marvelled at the foresight of whoever had decided to name the stuff that could be immediately useful in ancient greek, sparing us headaches on occasions like this. Quietly, I set a rope on the opposite side of the ship and let myself fall off, quickly climbing down and soon reaching the sandy beach under the Adamas.

Asking for permission would have been stupid, I would never get it, but I would observe quietly and help if needed, otherwise I would return back immediately in order to avoid being discovered.

I followed the team of four demi goddesses at a distance, before running straight while hidden by the tall herbaceous weeds that rose thirty centimetres over my head, and then balancing myself instinctively on the partially underwater roots of the mangroves. After maybe fifteen minutes of nonstop run on the irregular terrain, I heard Jillian's group disappear in a clearing that was somehow lower than the rest of the submerged ground while shouting "ADAMAS!" and when I had reached them, I momentarily froze. In the centre of the area a snake was flailing horribly, several stumps were smoking at the base of its neck, while two heads were rapidly reacting to the new enemy.

Just as I saw Charlotte anticipate Jillian and move to slash away a head that was already weakened by the previous fight with Icarus' group, everything clicked: a Hydra. Emily shouted a warning and her sister held back from completing the attack, turning it into a wide swing with the flat of her blade that batted away the incoming second head. "Greek Fire!" Jillian shouted as she started throwing small vases on the beast: "Abi! Rescue Icarus, we'll hold the Hydra!"

I widened my eyes as I saw the daughter of Apollo sling her bow on her torso without hesitating and running on the edge of the clearing, jumping with precision from root to low branch until she had reached her objective, and when I looked at him, a gasp left my lips. He was covered on small cuts and scrapes typical of those who had been chunked across the woods far too many times, his sword was a strange lump of half molten bronze at his feet, while I could distinguish at least three different pieces of his shield in different places. Worst than everything anyway was his abdomen. A piece of wood as thick as both my wrists had pierced him, and from the bloodied first half of the wood that was laying at his feet, I could imagine the succession of events that had led to it. He had been unlucky, it was simple as that.

He had been likely tossed away by the enormous snake several times before, with all probability counting over his shield to smooth down the blow on his back, only that the last time the shield was already in pieces and he had encountered a branch at an angle that didn't allow it to either bend or break in a way that would avoid Icarus getting stabbed. *What can I do, what can I do?* I thought furiously, my mind running over options and discarding them faster than I could properly imagine them: in a melee, I would not only distract Jillian, Charlotte, and Emily, but would likely only get myself killed, I had a knife, not a ballista to use. I wasn't strong enough to use Abigail's bow, and I didn't know how to heal... Going towards Icarus would likely only distract Charles, who was doing the inhumanly possible to grant everyone a stable ground on which stand but the Hydra, who was constantly harassed by the leaves. "I... can't do anything..." I murmured out loud.

"I'm out of arrows!" another voice resounded in the clearing "I used the last ones to keep the heads off Icarus!"

As I looked around, I suddenly found how I could help. I moved as fast as I could on the other border of the strange clearing, soon enough finding myself at Icarus' side, Abigail's hand were glowing of a pale golden and were placed over the deep gash over his belly. "I'll take your quiver to Sofia!" I spoke quickly, my hands working on the knots that secured it to the healer's belt. And two seconds later, I was gone, once more running on the outer side of the clearing being as careful as I could about not falling.

In less than a minute, I had reached Sofia general position: "Sofia! I've got Abigail's quiver!" I shouted. Four seconds later, the demigoddess moved amongst the higher branches of the groove, dropping on one of the lower branches and letting herself swing down while keeping her knees on the wood, only to quickly grab the quiver and shot back up among the leaves: "Stay here until we tell you it's safe!" She

ordered/reprimanded me with a half-serious glare while she returned to position from where she could contribute to the fight.

Once more, I ran back to Icarus' side, carefully *not* looking at his grievous wound. "How can I help?" I asked, causing Abigail to divert momentarily her gaze to me, before sighing and frowning, turning immediately back to the slow words muttered in ancient greek that I couldn't make out, causing the golden glow of her hands to briefly intensify.

"Try to fashion a cot to carry him away as soon as he's stable." She ordered, and I nodded, glancing briefly at the ongoing fight before running back among the trees, looking for a couple of branches straight enough. Something like a bed sheet could be fashioned out of our shirts.

I had been waiting sitting in an out of the way angle while playing with the same length of rope I had been learning how to make knots with. It had been days, days of wait, as Sofia and Abigail went in and out, keeping up an unending, constant flow of whatever magical healing was. Finally, Sofia came out, this time looking directly at me and nodding with deep bags under her eyes. I scampered on my feet right away and ran to the door.

The infirmary smelled a bit, a mixture of blood, sweat and bitter herbs. The only occupied bed had low barriers on the sides to stop him from falling off in his sleep. I walked forward until I was at his side, and hearing my footsteps, he opened his bleary eyes to look at me: "You didn't jump in." he said softly with a smile.

"I... well, I wanted to, but... it would only have made things more difficult for everyone... so..." I didn't know how to answer.

"Well done." he managed to nod among the pillows. I stared at him surprised "But... I didn't help! I... was... I was useless, I didn't do anything!" and a bandaged hand landed on my head: "You've done well." he said.

"Thinking is rarely comfortable, but always a better alternative than simply acting. As your mother's daughter, I expect you to understand it better than others." He spoke, and I found myself living again he last 'serious chat' we had, just after the... disaster on the Titan's island.

"I followed the others off the ship without asking for permission!" I protested: "Shouldn't you be angry with me!?" I didn't understand, at all, it was exactly the opposite thing he had told me the last time. He chuckled slowly, breathing deeply to gain enough breath to answer: "I'd say that the fear you felt seeing the Hydra less than ten meters from you is enough for your little escapade, considering that instead of jumping in and dying stupidly you kept your cool and found a good way to help."

I was left speechless, Icarus wasn't supposed to *make sense!* He was going against what he had punished me for the last time: "I saw that there were only two wounded heads when we arrived, you..." *for the gods, he was Strong. I've seen how it moved.* "How did you manage to kill so many with only Charles and Sofia as support?" if he wasn't going to scold me, I might as well try to learn something.

He tried to give out a chuckle, but when the first wheezing sound was leaving his lips, he was already asleep.

## ICARUS POV

2 May 2001

Six months. It had taken me two months to be able to walk again without stabbing pain in my side at every single step, and another four to regain complete mobility. After painstakingly long sessions with Abigail, both of direct healing, physiotherapy, and casual sex, just to 'test my swing', I could now torque my body like I always did without needing to be careful about it. Sure, now I had a horrible lump of scars in my side, where the skin was just a tiny bit slow to stretch when needed, but the muscles beneath it were in working condition.

For some reason, the magic healing gifted to the daughters of Apollo shown itself to be less than effective with me. I had cursed myself many times in those months: 'Hitting an Oracle?' not a good idea. But even so, I knew that I would have done it again. In my mind was obvious that the Future had no reason to be known by mortals. Either stuff happened and we had 0 control over it, or our free will built the future with unerring precision. I had felt the weight of preordered events on my own skin when Zeus went and turned his own daughter into a fucking tree, and I lashed out on the closest representative of Fate.

I stood from my bed in the captain quarters marvelling at the utter lack of pains, needling, twinges and whatnot. I walked towards the small crate that had ben left on my desk and slowly opened it: the 'trophy' fro killing the Hydra had been declared to be given to me by everyone. After all, I was clearly the one who had paid the harshest price for the battle, beyond being the one to inflict the bigger damage and stalling it while the others organized themselves. The fang was easily fifty centimetres long, and it's normally white colour was partially hidden by an oily black sheen, so thin that it made the whole thing look grey.

I looked it for several moments, my mind easily falling back on the steps of the battle, recalling how I had to dedicate every ounce of concentration I possessed to controlling and directing my powers, which answered to my will only if it expressed an exact result. There was no 'uh, a pull in my gut, look, I won' copyrighted by Percy Jackson, and the difficult of handling the Mist while keeping a rough grasp on the water had felt akin

splitting my own mind apart. I shook my head and closed the chest's lid, immediately imagining what kind of weapon could be built with it, the chains made of Stygian Iron and the branch taken from Era's garden. I left the room, focusing on the present and on my real objective. *We've been derailed from our target for so long already, how much longer will we be forced to stay on the sea?*

"People!" I shouted to the proper encampment that the crew had set up between the beach and the edge of the immense groove that covered the vast marsh: "I'm healed! Tomorrow, we set sail! Tonight, we get plastered!" a laugh of approval immediately answered me, with Abigail and Sofia taking out a couple of guitars to get started, Alexandra and Helena, like the proper daughters of Dionysus that they were, dragged out of the hull of the ship the wine we had left. Charles had joined the, rolling out a barrel from his personal reserves and playing reedpipes. They must have been going stir crazy, because, in less than fifteen minutes, Hanna left the ship, helped by Emily, carrying the brazier that we kept nailed in the galley.

After half an hour, I felt a slight warmth on the cork blessed by Dionysus, and I knew that he at least was rooting for us. I eyed the encampment with a distant gaze: it was hard to imagine that we, that is to say, 'my crew', since I was convalescent until recently, had pulled it off. Wary of further encounters we were unlikely to survive, several trees had been taken down and raised again in a wall that isolated the stretch of land that we had claimed for ourselves. We didn't go crazy with the buildings, even if the daughters of Athena on board of the Adamas had tried to build a fucking city when we needed barely a few solid yurts.

David had built himself a proper forge, out of boredom, no doubt, and everyone had found some way to keep busy. And since we were talking about teenagers with no supervision and no drug around, it meant a lot of sex. David and Demetra had quickly become a stable couple, as well as Emily and Madison, Hannah and Evelyn, and... I wasn't really keeping track of their relationships, I couldn't care less, even if I wished them all the god they could find in each other. Charles was a satyr of the Old Ways apparently, which meant that he was down for random sex during the kickass party thrown with Dyonisus' blessing, but he would wait for a proper Nymph otherwise.

Emily had kept pummeling everyone with the excuse of a spar, and it resulted in everyone being much more competent with a vast array of weapons, while Jillian had taken to devise strategies that the others had quickly learned the ins and outs of. All in all, the last six months had done a lot of good to my crew.

Annabeth eyed the glass I handed her with a wary expression: "Are you giving me alcoholics?" I laughed, it was so absurd being happy about having survived a fucking Hydra? "Only a little, with some nectar to cut it off, you'll like it, and it won't be enough to damage your liver."

I kept an eye on Annabeth, who had become the official mascot of the Adamas. She was either ten or eleven years old, and she kept trying to sound as serious as possible, while

trying to think ways to find Thalia's island without needing to roam without purpose. I scoffed lightly: she had no idea of the sheer pettiness the gods were capable of, even if she was acutely aware now that actions had consequences. Even while driving, dancing and becoming generally molest, each member of the crew walked on eggshells around her, maybe covered by the steely glint in her eyes, characteristic that she had obviously inherited from her mother.

"Why so glum?" a voice asked me out of nowhere, making me spin on myself in order to identify its owner.

"Hailey," I greeted the demigoddess with a smile: "what does make you think I'm feeling down?"

She shrugged uncaringly, taking a deep gulp from her own glass: "It's how I call your 'pensive' mode, it's unsettling how much you tend to fall into it without any apparent reason."

"Maybe it's Hermes blood singing in you, fearing that I'm planning a theft beyond your abilities." I joked.

"I'm not claimed, I thought you knew." She answered, clearly clamping down on the occasion of speaking about her parents. It was uncharacteristically, and not only for her, among the social disasters that the demigods were, very few had pleasant memories about their homes. As a rule of the thumb, mythological beings, benevolent or not, tended to fuck up the mortals they interacted with.

*Is she wondering why I asked her to join me?* That she so clearly stated that she wasn't claimed immediately brought up a topic that most would prefer to leave alone. "I knew that the others were claimed because they lived in the other gods' cabins, otherwise they might as well be strangers: I knew what they felt and what motivation they could have to join me, it was enough. It's the same for you."

"I have an idea about who my godly parent actually is." she announced, causing me to raise an eyebrow, surprised at her insisting on the topic: "I know mine too." I offered, not really seeing the point. She knew, good for her, she could more easily find out her powers and better train herself, but I sure as hell didn't need to know.

"When we had to face the Hydra, you had me on a support role, like I was a daughter of Hermes." she accused me. "And so?" I shrugged again, taking another swing from my cup: "You're good in that role." I gestured to the festive encampment: "Everything went well in any case, did it not?" I could almost see her take a step back from me towards an area where the light from the fires was dimmer.

"I'm the one responsible for 'everything going well' in the past months." she trailed off a bit, before taking a deep breath, clearly preparing herself for a big revelation: "I think... no, I'm sure of it it's just..." she took a deep breath and centred herself, forcing her



stuttering and uncharacteristically skittish demeanour to fade: "I am a daughter of Hypnos." She announced, obviously expecting me to freak out.

"My mother is Hekate, my father a very old son of the King of the Sea." I answered in kind, I didn't see any kind of problem in telling it to Hailey in what was clearly a secretive fashion, her secret for mine, it felt like an honest exchange.

"I know." she replied, and there I frowned, there was a little clue about Poseidon in the way I fought and managed to keep up with Thalia, but for her to guess... *Didn't she say that everything went well in the camp because of her? What did she do, manipulated their dreams to keep them appeased?*

"I may have pushed certain dreams in a specific direction to keep everybody calm." She confirmed my theory without blinking, and I frowned some more. *If she's been able to somehow glean my parents from my sleep, what's to say that she didn't discover that Hekate pulled me out of some kind of Beyond?*

It was only then that she finally decided to bring out what had truly been gnawing at her: "Icarus, why my uncle is interested in you?"

"Your uncle?" I repeated dumbly. *Wait a minute... Oh, Shit.* I cursed immediately in my head as I realized what had happened: Hypnos was the son of Nyx and Erebus, the twin brother of Thanatos, the Death himself. It wasn't a coincidence that in the myth death so closely resembled a deep sleep. *I have surely walked the line between the two realms in the first days of my healing, but for Hypnos to take notice, or worse, his twin?* I had the growing suspicion that Hekate hadn't been entirely truthful when she told me of my origins, after all, what could interest Death itself if not the result of some necromancy? Not for the first time, I cursed a bit at the domains that my mother ruled over.

*Okay, I thought, taking a deep breath, New Objective: staying away from the twin of Death, let's see let's see... In Greek myth, Hypnos is variously described as living in the underworld, which would make it safe for me to roam around, or on the island of Lemnos. At least according to Homer, who I would take somewhat as the Top authority in this field.* My thoughts started to spiral a bit out of control, since I knew that given my lifestyle, Death was very likely to stumble upon me at some point, or at least on someone close to me, hadn't we lost already two people to the fury of the sea?

"Icarus why in your dreams you know the future?" Hailey asked me, and I cursed some more.

## **Chapter 14: Hug for the Win**

*"Icarus why in your dreams you know the future?" Hailey asked me, and I cursed some more.*

## HUG FOR THE WIN

**(also known as effective affection)**

I briefly thought about how to answer while keeping the cards regarding my true origins close to my chest, but it was difficult, and bullshitting my way through this conversation would have forced me to walk on eggshells around Hailey for a very long time, which would defy the secondary purpose of the voyage I had started: to be fucking free to do as I pleased.

"I..." I started to answer, my eyes trailing over her form and the reasonable distance between us and the rest of the camp. I couldn't kill her quietly, even if the thought became startlingly clear in my mind for a split second. I was somewhat aware that our action defined us, even more so while being so deep inside a mythological realm, and just as I had made mine Atlas' stubbornness and impossible determination, I didn't want to make a part of me the act of betrayal on the basis of keeping a secret. Like never before, I became aware that my life as a demigod, no matter how absurd, was real, and that there were a lot of beings more than capable of killing me simply because of a grudge. Making an enemy of Hypnos, whose realm I visited every night, and maybe Thanatos himself, who I suspected already had a bone to pick with me given my origins, sounded like an extremely stupid thing.

Besides, Hailey had apparently been instrumental to keep the peace in the camp, and that was without considering the help she gave me on more than one occasion during our self-imposed mission. Repaying honesty with a knife between her ribs sounded like a dick move.

"I don't know for sure." I honestly replied. *And how did she know that I've known about the future? It's not like I remember the awful movies that had been made based on the books, I've never read the comics and...* I mentally slapped myself, I had no idea about how Hailey's power could work, but the human brain worked by association, it was more than likely that whatever she had been able to glean from my memories, or distracted thoughts about my plans regarding how to handle the king of titans, had been 'translated' by association with images and ideas that worked for Hailey.

"But you have an idea." she pressed me, cutting off my planning-time.

I sighed, not really knowing how to go about this, in a sense, I could imagine the easiness that I could live with when alone with a person that knew, on the other hand, there was a shady connection between demigods and other supernatural beings that I wasn't eager to bank on. Hekate kept me safe from outside influences, or at least prevented my thoughts and innermost secrets from being read by the first god to cross my path, Hypnos, and Thanatos by extension, would likely be *very* interested in me. Not that much for the knowledge I held, but because of its implications. Thusly, telling

Hailey, or another demigod, *everything*, was a big no. "My mother rules over crossroads, which symbolize free choice, she is the daughter of Asteria, Titan goddess of nighttime divinations such as oneiromancy, by dreams, which I suspected you witnessed a little part while poking your nose around me, and astrology. My maternal grandfather, on the other hand, is Perses, Titan god of destruction."

"Icarus, you won't be able to distract me by recounting your ancestry, I want to know how..." she started to sound annoyed and tried to admonish me when I interrupted her with a slow snarl.

"You've asked for an explanation, sit and listen!" I barked, pushing her slightly towards the fallen trunk of a small tree that could act as a bench. "As I told you, my father was, or is, I don't know and don't care, a demigod from the King of the Sea." She huffed in irritation and crossed her arms expectantly, waiting for me to make a point. "And I grew up until I was twelve in a hut in Alaska, raised by someone that... if not for the Rules that forbid any contact between a godly parent and their child... I would suspect was my mother." My flat tone clearly conveyed how much the Rules had clearly been broken in my case.

That caused the daughter of Hypno to raise an eyebrow, recognizing the unlikely circumstances regarding not only my birth, but also my first years. "My theory," I continued, "is that between the unusual amount of godly spark within me, caused by having a demigod of the sea and a Titan goddess of witchcraft as a mother, coupled with my first years, I can somehow access a little of my grandparents' realms, undoubtedly because my mother did something to ensure it, I have no doubt."

I saw that she was as unsure as I felt regarding my explanation, but what other reason could she find behind my explanation? That I was a reincarnated soul from a world in which her reality had been written and narrated as a novel for kids? Such a thing was well beyond what a simple jump of intuition could bring her. "So more often than not I dream a future of destruction and extreme devastation. I don't know if it's written or not, I had dreamt that Thalia would end up as a tree, but I didn't really give it any weight, it didn't really make sense at the time."

Hailey frowned at my explanation, likely fighting between the outrage of me being raised by my godly mother, and her sceptical reaction to my convoluted explanation. It was a natural way to answer to my bullshit, but I had come really close to skirting the truth, and I wouldn't say anything more on that regard. I didn't truly believe it, if it were so, every demigod could access not only their godly parent domain but all of the others' ones, since there was a clear relationship at some point among everyone.

"It sounds strange that you're the only one capable of such." she objected in the end, but I could see in the way she looked at the camp that she was busy going over the implications of my explanation, having, in her heart at least, already accepted it.

I very carefully avoided to out my bullshittery with any kind of outwards sign of relief, instead choosing to ask: "Do you have a better theory?"

She shook her head minutely: "I just don't know why T... death... would be interested in you." and before I could reply, she went ahead: "But maybe you magically stink of necromancy because of your mother, or something like that."

I nodded thoughtfully, it was a reasonable assumption, and even if it was clearly wrong, I didn't dislike the outcome, and away from me the thought of interfering with her assumptions: "Can you keep this quiet? I still don't know if everything that I see comes to be as I see it, regardless of what I do to prevent it, or because of my attempts to avoid it. I have enough problems with questioning my choices based on what I see during the night without the need of strange looks from the crew." I pleaded.

Hailey studied me for a couple of seconds, I didn't know what she was looking for, but apparently, she found it and scoffed: "You've got a big secret, I understand why you kept it quiet, and your spectacular falling with Luke gains a whole different depth with this. If you want to talk about it with me, I'll listen."

Her offer was made sincerely, and displayed a level of trust I found disarming, so I nodded gratefully: "Thanks Hailey, you're a good friend." I let an arm rest over her shoulders and hugged her briefly.

And even as I uttered those words, that I knew were true, I felt that I would never tell the whole truth to anyone, if only because of the kind of attention that it could bring on me. With a sigh I turned once more to the festive camp, this would be the last night we spent on the Hydra's Island, and they had waited for this for months, I could only hope that Posidon calmed his tits in the meantime.

#### 4 May 2001

Two days later, we had survived another storm, and got lost once more in the Sea of Monsters. *In hindsight, hoping that Poseidon would stop being a cunt was wishful thinking.*

"Land ho!" a shout echoed from the top of one of the masts, where Annabeth had taken to spend some of her free time since we got back on the sea, and her acute voice ground almost painfully in my eardrums, reminding me that I originally hadn't wanted her on my fucking ship.

Everyone started moving towards the armoury, following the indications of Emily and Charlotte, after the last stunt of sending a lone team, everyone agreed that the 'rules' of having a small team scout ahead, as dictated by the protocol taught at the Half-Blood Camp, was dumb as fuck, so there would be a minimal team taking point, signalling the trail for a second one, bulkier and armed heavier, to follow.

In the past months, Jillian had set up a system of signals to be either scratched in the ground or in the bark of trees to communicate effectively the conditions encountered by the first team, so that the second team would have an idea about how to proceed.

More importantly, that set up allowed for the first team to proceed a bit more quickly than it would have without a support squad following, and it granted to those that took point the possibility of a quick retreat towards reinforcement.

"Thank you!" I shouted back, leaving the helm in position with a simple length of wood that stuck it as I left it by leveraging its rays against a nook in the deck. *Let's hope the aren't Lestrignons on this island, those would be super nasty.* Among all of the shit Ulysses had encountered, facing some kind of tribe composed by giant cannibals able to hurl rocks the size of minivans was among my least favourite scenarios, along with crossing Scylla and Cariddi, but that couple should be fixed on the Strait of Messina, back in Sicily, so I was reasonably hopeful that we weren't going to be eaten alive by a Lovecraftian Horror.

"What kind of shit are we about to face in your opinion?" Hailey made herself known with a lazy smile, and I didn't jump in surprise, no matter what everybody thought.

I shrugged, really the possibilities were uncountable: "Jillian had everyone learn some stuff about the Odissey, we're sailing the same sea, and we managed to land in the hunting ground of the Hydra, which had been killed by Heracles, so we are really out of reliable instruments to foretell what is going to happen." Her eyes narrowed at me, indicating that she wanted to pick on my unnatural knowledge of the future, and I shook my head minutely, I had honestly no idea of what was going to happen.

Annabeth had climbed down in the meantime, and was badly hiding her pouting next to me: "I still don't understand why I can't be on the Explorers Team." she grumbled just loud enough for me to hear. She had grown in leaps and bounds under Jillian's somewhat stern care, the younger daughter of Athena had slowly accepted that she wasn't the best demigod for every task, and was currently working on recognizing that until she hit twelve years of age, nobody would let her go gallivanting in a potentially deadly situation.

"If you manage to win in a straight fight against one of the demigods on the Explorers Team, you can join after having proved self-restraint and caution." I grinned at the kid that huffed in irritation at me, before turning on herself and glaring at everybody until she reached Abigail, who was setting up small packages containing a bit of Ambrosia for the demigods that were to go in the unknown island.

I withheld a snort, knowing that it would only end up incensing the younger girl even more, and we really didn't need her to go gallivanting on her own once more. She wasn't stupid, far from it, but demigods had a natural tendency towards bad choices, teenager demigods were even worse, and prepubescent demigods had a distinct lack of long-term planning ability. Keeping her on the Adamas was the best for everyone.

Taking up a scope that was tied with strips of leather to the closest mast, I took a look at the mass of land we were heading towards: from our position, it didn't look like a particularly big island, but then again, prospective was a bitch when Mist and Supernatural Beings were involved, so I couldn't be sure. The bedrock over which the green mass of a lush jungle sprouted from was of a stark white, almost certainly of limestone, while the low coastline was mostly characterized by white sand. *At least there isn't a volcano ready to explode in our faces.* I thought with a snort, we didn't need another Pompeii on our hands.

In a few minutes, no doubt our speed and distance influenced by whatever space-bending bullshit that characterized the Sea of Monsters, we started circling the island looking for a river that we could sail countering the current, just enough to make sue Poseidon didn't steal Adamas during the night. The lack of giant stones being thrown at us as soon as we approached the mouth of a river reassured me a bit: no Lestrignons.

The river was placid, and roughly fifty meters wide, it was surrounded on both sides by dense vegetation that looked almost like a barrier thought to stop people from making land as we planned to. Given our location, I doubted that it was a good thing. From my observing of the island by a distance, I knew that there was at least an area either covered in very small mountains, or in very big hills (the dense vegetation had forbidden me from taking a more accurate measure of the hillside).

In less than an hour, we had sailed against the current following it through two bends of the river, and reached a small, roughly circular, lake. That was not the most impressive sight that left many of us speechless: after a stretch of white sand that framed the calm expanse of water we had just intrude upon, there was a building built from white that looked like an open temple. From the fifteen meters tall columns that started after several steps, it created some sort of open-air corridor towards a facade, always in white marble, that was embedded in the hillside: over it there were draped countless vines, each carrying a multitude of either flowers or fruits.

As we made land, I ordered everyone to not cut down any wood yet, nor to hunt or drink, since I had a growing suspicion of where we were.

Hailey, Charles and I dropped over the bulwark and walked carefully beyond the white columns, our senses stretched to perceive whatever could signify a threat. What had me on edge, even given the conspicuous lack of enemy soldiers, wild animals ready to eat us and whatnot, was the long, oaken table covered with food. Distractedly, I recognized soft music echoing through the air, like Amy Lee and Whitney Houston had a daughter and taught her to sing since birth. Her voice drifted through the air like a lullaby. Her words were in some language other than Ancient Greek, but just as old, something that I had half-forgotten after leaving my little home in Alaska, it was Minoan, maybe, or something like that. I could understand what she sang about, moonlight in the olive groves, the colours of the sunrise. And magic. Something about magic. Her voice seemed to lift me off...

And it wasn't *just* food. Shiny fruit, just cooked meat, water that looked so fresh and pure that it would feel like having a purifying ritual in your heart as you drank it, and the smells...

I wrenched myself back from the table, checking immediately my companions that had luckily kept themselves out of range from the obviously suspicious looking table. My companions had remained beside the white columns, carefully sticking to the plan.

As I walked back towards them, I mouthed: 'Circe' and saw everyone pale accordingly. One thing was facing a random animal or mythological whatever, another was setting ourselves against a fucking sorceress that turned people into animals before eating them just for shit and giggles.

"I'm guessing that we're leaving?" he whispered anxiously.

I nodded grimly: "We're not equipped to deal with her." I gritted out, "And I'm not eager to have any of us turned into pigs, thank you very much."

In that moment, a crystalline laugh tore through the air, feeding like drops over diamonds, pure and clear and... I violently shook my head, biting the inside of my cheek in order to ground myself.

Seeing the already vacant eyes of my companions, I dug into myself, immediately recognizing that we were just as risk as we had been against the Hydra, I reached through the deep, muddled power within myself, something that had always felt clear and gargantuan, slipped through my fingers a couple of times before I managed to actually *feel* it.

Without hesitating, I *pushed*, and the subtle and clean enchantment that was laid upon us got torn like a spiderweb under a pickaxe. Even as it faded however, I was able to feel its smoothness, its balance and elegance. It wasn't your ordinary run of the mill illusion, nothing targeted specifically towards my group, it was something... vaster, and the song had simply brought us to see the embroidery at the edge of...

**I am free.** I repeated my mantra to myself, finding again the determination that had allowed me to sail through the impossible storm that Poseidon had thrown at us, the strength of will that had made me gain the title of 'Skyholder' if I were to listen to Prometheus.

"I should have known that your band of misfits would know about me." and I could *hear* her smile: "But I've stopped turning men into pigs centuries ago, even if I manage to have my fun in other ways."

"Circe, sorceress, the daughter of Helios, the faded sun god, and of the ocean nymph Perse. Capable with drugs and incantations of changing humans into wolves, lions, and swine." Charles gritted out with his eyes clenched shut.

We all had learned that the Greek hero Odysseus visited her island, Aea, with his companions, whom she changed into swine. But Odysseus, protected by the herb moly, which apparently was a gift from Hermes, compelled her to restore them to their original shape. He stayed with her for one year before resuming his journey.

I turned and looked her over: her long dark hair was braided with threads of gold. She had piercing green eyes and wore a silky black dress with shapes that seemed to move in the fabric: animal shadows, black upon black, like deers running through a forest at night.

I immediately looked away, metaphorically sidestepping the compulsion weaved in her dress as I clamped a hand over Charles' shoulder, because our satyr companion was extremely easy to trick by beautiful looking women, it didn't matter that they were capable of turning us in mosquitos or not: "Return to the Adamas, Charles, tell David to not leave it for any reason, and to the girls to keep an eye out."

"I don't recall allowing you to do so, satyr." her voice cut cleanly through my orders, and Charles attention was immediately captivated again.

*What to do what to do? Known weaknesses? None because it's fucking magic.* I thought feverishly, before betting everything on a half-baked plan that I had in the backburner since Annabeth had freed Prometheus.

"Perhaps I should simply complete what your master has left half-done and turn you into a goat, we could cook you along with your demigod friend, you, who have corrupted so many maidens..." Circe walked forward as if sliding over the ground, her feet not making a sound as she extended her hand towards our resident satyr... she seemed almost to slither over the sand, even if nothing in her form reminded me of a reptile, I could only think about how much she resembled a snake, and not the beast' best qualities.

"Hailey," I whispered: "Accompany him to Adamas, tell David 'plan P', and try to figure out if you can make her fall asleep." I turned towards the immortal currently playing with her food to be before the daughter of Hypno could give a retort, and slammed my will against the enchantment that Circe was delicately posing over Charles.

The magic she was waving over the satyr was different from her sly compulsion, delicate yet tight, precise yet created with a single broad stroke of her skill, what little of it I could perceive was maddening with its contradictions, defying what I understood of magic on a general level, as she wasn't twisting something that already existed, Mist had nothing to do with it, and it was something that operated on a deeper level, something more difficult to overcome.

Nevertheless, it looked like the first brick that built my identity, my 'I am free' revelation, granted me some inspiration necessary to break through the binding that Circe was forging around my companion.



**I am free.** Without thinking, I took a step forward, clapping my hand soundly over Charles' shoulder before he could be turned. My power, something that I understood only by broad strokes and that I had never tried to direct without either Mist or Greek Letters as a channel, acted with all the grace of an enraged bull against the crystalline rope that was being used to *change* my friend.

The satyr scampered away while Circe' lips twitched upwards: "You'd challenge my magic, little demigod? I see why Hekate likes you." she commented, turning her head towards me, pinning me where I stood with the sharp green glass shards of her eyes, once more I felt like she was a snake ready to lung to my face.

"I wonder why old Poseidon would be so annoyed with you as to push you in this part of my domain instead of the resort that I've created exactly to take care of pesky little demigods with more guts than brains." she tilted her head a bit, her eyes wandering briefly over my remaining companion before looking in the direction of our ship, which despite being hidden from sight, didn't seem to escape the attention of the sorceress.

"An interesting vessel.. 'Adamas'," she scoffed, "Such a male name, no doubt born from your mind." she sniffed disdainfully: "At least your group is composed mostly by women, I can approve of the wisdom of it, or I could, if I didn't smell Dionysus influence over you. Disgusting reprobate."

"What they do with their lives is their choice." I frowned, I didn't quite remember what Circe had against men, was she one of the feminists that never realized the difference between equality and random rampage? Given her last comment over my character, I could guess that she thought every male to be a rapist of some sort.

Circe's green eyes fell over me like sharp shards of glass, pinning me where I was, looking me over a couple of times before tilting her head upwards, staring unrepentantly at the sun: "And why does the Usurper dislike you so?"

"The one with the golden chariot and a troublesome ego?" I asked pointing upwards with a gesture from my thumb, asking for clarification.

"He took what was of my father, so I call him with his proper title." she narrowed her eyes at me, as if challenging me to dispute her claim.

"I... may have punched his Oracle, or kicked it, I don't remember," I answered carefully maintaining a hold over my senses, wary of whatever magic she could try to weave around and over me: "And I may have fought the Lieutenant of the Hunt, so even She of The Wild is less than enthused with me."

That brought a startled laugh out of her lips, I didn't think she expected such candour from me: "You don't seem to be so wise now, given the enemies you appear to chose for yourself."

She returned her attention towards my remaining companion, smiling lightly in their direction: "Don't worry girl, you don't have anything to fear from me."

Sofia was the only one at my side still, since I had sent Hailey away with Charles, hoping that my half-assed solution could be implemented. However, the daughter of Apollo, who had to bit her own tongue in order to not reprimand Circe for how she had referred to her father, hadn't extracted their weapons, following my decision of trying to get out of the situation using words instead of force, which would backfire spectacularly against someone such as Circe.

Sofia looked at me, making me shrug as an answer to her quiet request for instructions. *Never trust an immortal, they're fucked up.* I wanted to tell her, but I was still very much inside of Circe's range, and I wasn't sure about what I could do if she actually *tried* something against me.

"I don't fear you." Sofia growled back, showing aggressivity that I wouldn't have expected to see from her, but something that as long as it was directed away from me, I saw no reason to question.

Circe smiled faintly at her, dismissing her words without an afterthought, and while she was distracted with her new game of poking at Sofia's pride, I tried to *see* through the Mist-not-Mist that surrounded the place, focusing on the specs of golden dust that I could see with the corner on my eye before twisting them in order to...

Circe scoffed, distractedly suppressing my effort with a bland gesture of her hand: "You're one hundred years too young to try magic in my home, demigod. Transmutation, illusion, and necromancy are my preferred fields, but you don't seem to grasp that Magic is Female, and something meant for Women, men lack the sensibility to weave such an art appropriately."

I shrugged: "I can use the Mist well enough, and have discovered a feeling for plants after spending some time in the Queen's garden." I had honestly no idea about how to accomplish some of the shit I knew magic was capable of. Medea had raised an army of skeletons from a bunch of dragon' teeth.

I frowned thinking about what I knew: *Kirke's name is derived from the Greek verb kirkoô meaning "to secure with rings" or "hoop around", a reference to the binding power of magic.*

We, or better yet, I, had the small advantage of having freedom as my main characteristic, I had proven that much time and time again, but apparently being free from bindings, be they Poseidon's storm attempting to destroy my ship, Ouranos' weight trying to crush me, Her's will pressing against mine and trying to make me submit, or Circe's own brand of subjugation, did not extend to being able of ignoring someone else's power, so I couldn't keep my friends from being overwhelmed by Circe's magic.

*Admittedly, it was fanciful wishing.* I grimaced a bit, even if I hoped that eventually, my Name would gain enough power to whispered carefully. I could speculate that at that point I would be able to brandish my will in order to break whatever binding I found.

"So..." I coughed discreetly, "If that's okay with you, we'll leave without trouble with the dawn's tide." I spotted Hailey moving down from the Adamas, Emily and Hailey hauling a black cargo over their shoulders as they moved quietly over the sand. Without any deliberate movement, in order to not make her suspicious, I walked in a circle around her, letting my eyes roam over her form.

That brought a frown over the sorceress' elegant features: "I don't really like males, but on the other hand, you *did* in fact, kick the Usurper's little Oracle." she stared me down, as if expressing clearly that I couldn't lie to her, "And you fashion yourself a budding mage... a challenge perhaps, with the males of your crew on the line. If you win, you're free to go, otherwise, I keep you, and in any case, all the girls on the ship who wish to stay with me, will be able to do so."

I frowned: "Well, that's not exactly..." I gulped when I saw wolves and deers run across the clothes of the Sorceress, and I had the acute feeling that they had been trespassers once too, "... If I win, I take something I want from the island." I blurted out, making the immortal in front of me smile sweetly.

In the meantime, I eyed the wary form of Sofia, and brought my right arm up, as to massage my ear, or scratch it. Immediately, her eyes widened and turned towards Circe, who was still studying me with curious eyes.

"It's not like you'll be able to win." she sniffed, "Very well, you win my challenge, and you and yours will be able to leave my home with something of your choice." it was ridiculously open-ended to my advantage, but she really expected to win, like all immortals to ever challenge a demigod, it was really banal, in hindsight, but I wasn't in the position to refuse any kind of advantage.

"If I win, the males of your crew will join the little zoo I'm holding here, and I'll be free to do as I please with the females."

"I can only promise that I won't interfere, their choices are their own." I reminded her, at which she made a dismissive gesture with her hand, agreeing to my correction.

"Will you swear on the Styx?" I asked, at which she narrowed her eyes at me.

"Will you?"

"I always keep my word." I retorted while rising an eyebrow, pointing out silently that it wasn't me the one who could turn the tables on her.

She looked at me curiously, blinking a couple of times, as if surprised, before regaining her composure: "Very well. I swear on the Styx that I'll keep the terms of the challenge

I've issued and upon which we have agreed, but if your little mortal friends attack me, the bet is off."

A peal of thunder rumbled in the cloudless sky, sealing her words.

Then, Circe smiled: "It's time for me to name your challenge."

*I knew I had forgotten something.* Then I blinked, recognizing the failing strands of foreign magic over me... *The sneaky bitch!*

"You cheat even before the beginning of the challenge" I accused her, causing her to smile unrepentantly at me.

"You still think that Illusions and Mist can hide only the appearances..." she chuckled, "Many of my girls never surpass that point in their studies."

Then she straightened some more, gaining a solemnity that was hidden just behind the soft tilt of her shoulders: "Your task, since you fashion yourself capable of Magic, is to turn me into an animal."

My jaw fell for a second, before I lifted my chin and eyed the Immortal shrewdly: "My fault for telling you what I was capable of, I guess... but at least you can promise to not use your magic on me, only to undo my spells on you."

"It's not very sportive to change the terms after you agreed to compete."

"It's not sportive to trick me into not asking what the challenge is until after I agreed to compete, and I'd like for you to not attack me until the challenge is done, how do you expect to measure my magic if I'm busy staying alive instead of making you into an animal? And since we're already there, you'll agree to keep the form in which I force you for let's say 24 hours, during which you won't use magic or your people against us, giving us the time to leave and enough advantage for you to not smite us into nothingness." I narrowed my eyes, making her smile condescendingly.

"I guess you want me to swear that too on the Styx?" she grinned then, her eyes gleaming at the options my request opened to her: "I wouldn't harm you for an honest win... But I guess... since you attacked the Usurper's little Oracle, I can acquiesce your request, since it's speculation, nothing more, you won't win."

"I swear on the Styx," she started, only to sudden narrow her eyes and grin as if she had spotted a trick, "*that until the end of this challenge,*" her smile was far too wide to be anything less than an open showing of teeth in a threatening manner, "I'll not use my magic directly on you, but only use it against your spells, and that you'll be safe until the end of the challenge, and that if you manage to turn me into an animal, I'll keep that form, without using magic, for 24 hours."

As a clap of thunder sealed her words, she tilted her head: "Happy now?"

I nodded, my mind already running around in circles trying to figure a loophole that I could use." had she been hasty as I expected an Immortal assured of her victory to be, I would have simply attacked her, knowing that she couldn't harm me with magic, but the moment in which I attacked her with the intent of harming her, the challenge would be forfeited, and I knew that I had been more than simply lucky in order to avoid to swear on the Styx myself.

Then the solution proved itself clearly, since I had no idea about how to turn people into animals, I had to push Circe to do it herself, I doubted that she was unable to do it.

"Immortals do not learn." I shook my head with a faint smile, "**Atlas** was the same." I spoke, accepting knowingly the weight of the name, and making it mine, anchoring my will to the Titan's presence as I took a step forward, embracing Circe before she could react.

I was around 1.75 meters tall, nothing to write home about, while the immortal in front of me stood around 1.60 meters of height, making it so that her forehead reached my chin.

I didn't hesitate to pin her harms to her sides, while my arms closed around her midriff, just around the lower part of her ribcage.

"What are you...?"

I squeezed, forcing the rest of her breath out from her chest, ignoring the feeling of her breasts squishing against me, making mine the pain that came with the groaning of my sinews as I started to exercise the same kind of strength that allowed me to hold the Sky.

"You see, the terms of the challenge are that you must turn into an animal, not that my magic must do so." I gritted out

"...It was implied..." she wheezed as I squeezed again, feeling more air leaving her lungs, as she tried to push back.

I had no hope to win arm-wrestling against... let's say, Ares, but strength was a part of War, while Circe's nature revolved around the creation of bindings and changing reality to accommodate her will. Physical strength was not a part of her identity, and thusly, once outwitted, as I had luckily accomplished, the job should be done.

"I thought about this method because I was thinking about how much you resembled a boa constrictor, you know?" I spoke tightly, feeling my muscles burn as the Immortal in my arms tried to oppose me.

With a tilt of my head, I made Sofia hide, since I didn't want her to turn into an animal trying to eat me, while Circe couldn't attack me directly, I already was tiptoeing the line by squeezing the air out of her, and I didn't need to leave a possible solution to the Immortal.

"You could turn into an animal at anytime, declaring me the winner." I reminded her, and I hissed in pain as I felt her teeth bite into my right shoulder, one of the few places where the armor offered a less than optimal protection. The Immortal' teeth quickly carved their way through the leather that joined the plaque of my chest with the ones on my arm, and Circe bit deeply, causing another stab of pain to travel across my overtaxed arms.

"To be honest, after holding the Sky, you're not that much of a challenge." I taunted her, causing Circe to raise her head from where she was being me with an enraged expression, as she started to hiss out an insult, I squeezed some more, lifting her from the ground and bringing her to my height.

She had bitten me in order to get free, not in order to harm me, otherwise, her Vow on the Styx would have been broken.

With her lips bloodied and a subtle blue colouring due to the lack of air, her white teeth gleamed out even more, reinforcing the first impression of her being a snake, I smiled lowering my head as she tried to headbutting me, lacking the strength to do any actual harm.

"Turn into an animal, and this can end." I repeated her, only for her eyes to go out of focus as the lack of air started to make itself known.

Then I spotted her pupils becoming slitted as her fangs elongated themselves and the minute drops of sweat that marred her before, shining minutely under the sun, looked more and more like small scales.

The change was smooth and swift, and I went from holding a slip of woman that weighed less than 50 kilograms, to wrestling against a giant ass snake that weighted farm more than it should have, and immediately I felt Circe coiling her spires around me while our roles reversed themselves, and I went from

"She can't use magic!" I shouted to Hailey and Emily, who had been intercepted and kept away by Sofia, that immediately took an arrow, readying it.

"Don't attack her, or she'll be able to turn us into ants!" I reprimanded her. *She was there when we discussed the terms of the challenge, wasn't she?* I thought, feeling myself a bit confused...

I wheezed as Circe' coils clamped harder around me, trying to make me expel the air I needed far more then the immortal to keep myself conscious.

"We need to tie her around a column, grab a piece of her!" Hailey immediately got my drift, a mad glint in her eye as she and Emily dropped the black chains that had once held Proetheus bound on the sand.

My arms shot forward, allowing my hands to close around Circe's reptilian head, clamping hard over it, since I didn't want to deal with her fangs along with the coils that I was already feeling around my torso.

I gritted my teeth, controlling the strength that I was exercising against the Immortal-turned-snake in order to not hurt her, only to keep her from biting me to death.

With three demi goddesses on my side, we managed to straighten out the unbelievably long snake, forcing Circe to round a couple of times around one of the columns of white marble around the area that held the food capable of turning those that ate it into animals.

As I was left holding Circe by the base of her head while Emily was holding the last of her tail, I was feverishly thinking about a way to keep the very dangerous snake put while I abused as much as I could out of my terms of the challenge, Hailey dangled in front of our eyes the shackle that had been one keeping Prometheus' wrists bound to the chains, showing us the celestial-bronze patch that David had likely added at some point during my six-months long convalescence.

Emily and Sofia managed to make a knot at the end of Circe's body after having her slid her body inside one of the manacles, while Hailey closed the one that had been repaired behind my hands. We were extremely lucky that Circe had chosen such a form, and that Prometheus' wrists were of an appropriate measure.

"Hailey, normally I wouldn't even try to ask you to lullaby to sleep an Immortal, but she's a snake now, and I suspect that she shares some of their weaknesses, if we bring here the sacks of reusable ice from the freezer to slow her metabolism, you'd think..."

"I can certainly try!" Hailey laughed, eyeing the Immortal Sorceress with a smug smile.

In relatively short order, we returned most of Prometheus' chains to the Adamas, where I rallied everybody but Alexandra and Hannah, the more peaceful among us that made sure to keep Annabeth under their watch, and we returned with haste to Hailey, where we dumped the reusable ice packs over the squirming snake, and we made our way towards the small door that would let us inside of Circe's actual home.

As Charles spotted Hailey, he had squeaked and jumped back: "That's a Malayopython Reticulatus, better known reticulated python! They can reach 10 meters of length and..."

"Charles!" I had laughed, "Nobody fucking cares, fill your ears with wax and keep an eye on Hailey." we still were exploring the effects of her Hypnos-related powers, and we had a lot of work to do about her targeting.

"Holy shit, you hug her to death!" was one of the comments from the other demigods when I recounted the recent events.

"Immortals do not die so easily." I countered.

"Okay people! LET'S LOOT THIS ISLAND!"

"Are you sure it's wise? She's an Immortal..."

"I don't care, she tried to take my people from me, we're taking everything we can from this fucking place. Hailey will keep singing and will be our insurance."

I turned towards my people, eyeing each one of them and spotting the same enthusiastic grin that I knew graced my features: I remained convalescent for 6 months, they waited for me, and inaction for a demigod was pure agony.

"Circe offered to let me take something of my choice from her island: my choice is EVERYTHING WE CAN!" I shouted over their heads: "All the food and drinks are not to be touched, they'll turn you into animals, drag them on the beach, we'll set them on fire for someone we don't like too much! If you see flowers, in particular, if they look like snowdrops, call me, but *do not touch them!* THEY'LL KILL YOU!"

Seeing as they had taken my warnings seriously, and were mostly jumping on their tiptoes in order to look over the small entrance that would allow us inside of Circe's home: "Everything else is fair game, take everything you like!" I laughed out loud.

As a single man, we shouted our warcry and charged forward: "ADAMAS!"

AN

**I usually use the first chapter to present a situation and the following one to solve it, introducing the events of the following one, I find that gives a good rhythm to the story and tends to keep the readers eager for more, but I can't find it in myself of leaving you hanging again, not this time at least.**

**I noticed that there is a lot of law of retaliation in many mythologic and religious works, so I found it appropriate to steer the confrontation with Circe in an appropriate direction.**

**And yes, I had the Adamas become basically a pirate vessel looting everything that they could while trying to find the objective of their original mission.**

**Canon starts in the summer of 2004, who knows what else will happen in the meantime? Prometheus, after all, is already around thanks to Annabeth, I don't know yet how much everything is going to change. Who's going to accompany Percy if Annabeth dearest doesn't make her way back in time for his quest to start?**

**Chapter 15: Warring Interlude**



**It's been a while since I've last updated, so here's a short recap:**

**A kid awakens with knowledge of Rick Riordan's books and other things, but no concrete memories about a previous life of any sort, and he's raised in the deep forests of Alaska until he's 13 years old by a mysterious woman that teaches him how to get started in manipulating the Mist.**

**Once he leaves, he reaches New York and sets himself up in an abandoned house near Long Island. Eventually, Thalia, Luke, Annabeth and Groover seek respite from the hounding of monsters in his home.**

**Forced to abandon his home, the kid (whose name is Icarus) follows them to the Halfblood Camp, and his presence is enough to avoid Thalia turning into a tree.**

**Luke, Thalia and Icarus become friends and the latter gains a form of respect from Dionysus because he sets up wild parties that get demigods drunk and randy, thusly reinforcing the domain of the God of Ritual madness.**

**Icarus eventually discovers that he's the son of a demigod of Poseidon and Hekate, which is ultimately responsible for the metaknowledge and rebirth of the Main Character.**

**When Luke asks for and gets assigned his mission to steal the Golden Apples from Hera's garden, he doesn't invite Icarus, who nevertheless sets off on his own, anticipating the members of the actual Quest.**

**Icarus meets Atlas and after tricking him, he holds the sky from the sunset to the dawn, while the titan takes a branch from Hera's tree (with 6 apples). Icarus kind of gets Atlas to drink himself into a stupor with a magical flask of wine, and they chat a bit.**

**After that, Icarus sends the branch and the apples (minus one) though Hermes-express back to his own hut in the Camp Half-blood, and enters the Queen's garden, where he gets the Nymphs of the sunset drunk and gifts them the single apple he's kept on his person.**

**Time gets wobbly for Icarus, but eventually, Luke (accompanied by Thalia) reach the garden, and in a fit of teen angst, the son of Hermes attacks Ladon, forcing both Icarus and Thalia to try their best in order to survive. They manage to escape, but Thalia is wounded with the venom of Ladon.**

**During the return trip, they meet Hera, who curses them (the consequences are not clear yet), and just as they reach Halfblood Camp, Thalia gets turned into a tree, confirming that Fate is an actual thing and not something that can be escaped from.**

**Luke and Icarus have a big fallout since the prophecy given to Luke by the Oracle kind of foretold that Thalia would get punished for her father's sin, but the son of Hermes ignored it.**

**Icarus strikes the Oracle, gaining the enmity of Apollo, and he fights against a Huntress of Artemis immediately after.**

**While preparing in order to restore Thalia to life, he asks for Hekate's help in order to gain the kind of power Percy Jackson wields in the books, and his mother accepts in exchange for 3 golden apples (another is taken by Hermes as payment for the expedition), leaving him with only one. Even so, she mysteriously states that there is still something that needs to happen in order for Icarus to become powerful as Thalia is.**

**Icarus takes up a crew of demigods and sets sail to the Sea of Monsters in order to retrieve the Golden Fleece, despite the lack of permission from the gods, and as such, the sailing is anything but smooth.**

**Annabeth (who is 10 years old) is a stowaway on the ship, and on the first island, she is tricked by Prometheus, and she frees him.**

**On the next island, Icarus is wounded while killing the Hydra.**

**A member of the crew is Hiley, daughter of Hypno, and she's told/discovers about Icarus metaknowledge, thinking him a seer of sorts, while Thanatos starts to get interested in him (he knows that there is something wrong).**

**After healing, the Adamas (that's the ship's name), reaches Circe's island, where Icarus outsmarts her.**

## **Warring Interlude**

**First part:**

**Adamas' Logbook**

5 May 2001

As I write, we're sailing East after my confrontation with Circe and subsequent invasion and raiding of her home.

The invasion of Aeaea, a.k.a. Circe's Island, took us more or less ten hours, ten hours of frenzy and savagery.

The several dozens of apprentices of Circe that tried to fight back got swiftly defeated, since most of their magic made use of small rituals or potions to enact their will, while I tore apart with gleeful abandon every attempt to turn the Mist against the Adamas' crew.

Unknowingly, as we took over section after section of the building hidden in the side of the cliff that had been turned into a resort on the side opposite to where we had made land, I found myself seeing everything under a thin purple tint, and I fuzzily recalled that I may have shaken the ground as I thundered my challenge to the residents of the island.

Hundreds of animals tried to swarm us, failing horribly, since it had been centuries since the last time Circe had turned people into wolves or pigs, preferring instead to humiliate those she bound within the forms of guinea pigs or colourful parrots. Even the occasional leopard isn't that much of a challenge after the kind of shit we've faced this far.

The people of the Adamas, led by me, took over swiftly, casually applying the wild energy that breathed just beneath our skin. Our blades fell, our shields bashed skulls, and if Emily and Charlotte used their knives to take scalps to offer to their father, nobody mentioned it.

"The city-stormer is with us!" one of them sang at some point, referring a rictus grin of savage glee on her face as her sword fell upon one of the relatively few wolves that attempted to attack us.

As I write these words, more to maintain a ladder of the accomplishment of this group of demigods that moves without needing the permission of the blessing from Olympus, I find myself drifting more and more often into considerations about the nature of divinity and faith. faith in ourselves, faith in each other, it's surprising how much camaraderie actually impacts our successes.

We lost Julia and Eric in the first storm Poseidon threw at us in a fit of outrage for some imagined slight, and I know that they're waiting on this rive of the Styx for us to find their bodies and perform the funereal rites.

6 May 2001

Ares is the distasteful aspects of brutal warfare and slaughter. I remembered that Ares used to be accompanied in battle by his sister Eris, known as Strife, and his sons by Aphrodite Phobos and Deimos, respectively Panic and Rout.

I write this down in order to remind myself that even if Charlotte and Emily are among the best of us, prolonged enough battle tends to bring out a feral instinct asleep deeply

inside of them. Against the Hydra they were all control and training, at least that is how much I can remember, but as I write now, the haze of the last days finally abating, I realize that while our power to affect the world grows the deeper we sink in our heritages, how much we are still ourselves and how much we express our divine parent's power is a very debatable thing.

I remember that as we stormed the home of Circe, gone were the golden tinted armours and happy go lucky attitude that was nurtured and maintained in Camp Half-Blood, it remained something primal and heavier, difficult to contain. I remember feeling myself almost fall back from the forefront of my mind, witnessing my wild swinging and random destruction of everything that I didn't immediately identify as useful or interesting to keep.

Some part of me, likely the same undeniable part of my soul that refuses to be bound, also refuses to bind others unless in combat. I can see myself growing to be a patron of some sort as my identity grows and my name gains weight, I must be extremely careful then, about the choices I make and the instincts I allow myself to follow, lest I became less than what I am, slave to something beyond my understanding.

During our invasion, the daughters of Ares found themselves taking point more often than not, and I was happy to follow them.

The only distinction that I was capable of making was between us and not-us. Distractedly, as we moved in the corridors hot with the smoke of the fires we spread and slick with the blood of Circe's people, I remembered that historically, at Sparta, in early times at least, human sacrifices were made to Ares from among the prisoners of war.

Maybe someone of the tentative sorceresses managed to escape, but we paid them little mind.

We brought panic and agony, leaving ashes and dead in our wake.

For a single night, we went at war.

We left the island with the dawn, Circe-as-a-snake asleep under bags of dry ice, for the shape she took was vulnerable to cold.

We raised great pyres for the bewitched food that we offered to Dionysus, since I thought that he would get a kick out of it, while Emily and Charlotte slaughtered in their father's name the ones that were captured alive.

Even so, while Charles remained with Hailey, ready to help (we took a page out of Odysseus' quest and had him put wax into his ears in order to not be sung into a death-like state by Hailey), I managed to restrain myself from the impulse of raping the fleeing women, and I saw David stop in several occasions, frowning heavily as if confused by his own actions when he took a step to pursue.

I am once more glad that I chose my crew to be composed mostly by women, as I don't know if I would have been able to peacefully contain my people had they been horny and bloodthirsty enough to take the Sorceress' apprentices by force.

9 May 2001

Today I was running on abrosia and greedy intentions as I steered the Adamas East, pointing us into the direction of the rising sun.

While the waves and winds were calm around us, I had to actively push against the subtle current that was trying to lead us back into Circe's domain.

It took me nine hours at the helm, without distractions, in order to overcome the umpteenth attempt from Poseidon to make us fail.

Only today I noticed that Emily and Charlotte gutted and skinned a boar each during the battle on Circe's island, and that now they don it as a cape whenever they can. They may or may not have seduced David in order to have him modify their elms so that they now sport the tisks of their preys.

I am conflicted about reminding them that those boars were more than likely transmuted humans.

Even so, I know that the boars are sacred to Ares, and thusly I can't quite bring myself to interfere. I'm still wondering if the camaraderie that keeps everyone together under my command is something I'm entirely responsible for, or if I have to thank Hailey' dream-related efforts and Hestia for her fire in the galley.

On another note, Hanna's vertical garden shows clearly that she's a worthy daughter of Demetra, and the fruits that she grows there make sure that we'll never risk scurvy as we sail.

That she managed to maintain such a variety of plants through hydroponics only spoke clearly of her heritage, and I am ready to admit that she is one of the more important members of the crew. Her role is mostly for support, there is no doubt about it, but she keeps everyone fed and rations the food (even if with a bit of help from Jillian, my 2nd mate.

The snowdrop-like flowers that we had brought with us from Circe's island are, as I suspected, moly. The Sorceress tried to occult them under a quite impressive set of illusions, but my talent to dispel those is second to none, and after my confrontation and exposure to Circe's sneaky magic, I feel myself growing... sharper, if it makes sense.

I report here what I remember of the plant that I know from the stories having a black root, while the flower is as white as milk:

The gods call it Moly, dangerous for a mortal man to pluck from the soil, but not for the deathless gods.

Proving that there is something unnatural about Hannah's knowledge, she confirmed my thoughts as she looked the plants over: "In the story, Hermes gave this herb to Odysseus to protect him from Circe's magic when he went to her home to rescue his friends. The Moly is grown from the blood of the Giant Picolous killed in the isle of Kirke. The ally of Kirke who killed Picolous was Helios. The combat was hard, malos in greek, from where the name of this plant comes. I'm glad that you managed to move the dirt around them in crates and to bring them over, I'll see if I can figure out something, maybe dew taken from their petals can be refined and strengthen us."

I hope that in the books we raided we'll learn enough to make use of the rare plant.

19 June 2001

We've been sailing for over a month, facing the occasional storm without too much issue. Apparently, either Poseidon forgot about us, or he's waiting for me to lower my guard. I find it hilarious since he's the one to recognize me as of his blood (at least standing to what Dionysus told me back during my first summer at the Half-Blood Camp).

I managed, with some help from pretty much everybody, to find a way to decrypt the tomes and parchments we took from Circe's island. Transmutation, Necromancy, a bit of Illusion. It's difficult to tell, as most of the knowledge seems to slide out of my thoughts just after I feel like I've grasped it.

I understand and can perform the more simple Illusions, as I was able to do the same before, but practising on my own, or even on my crewmates doesn't seem to grant me any deeper understanding of the art, and Necromancy is beyond me for the time being.

On a related note, Sofia and Abigail seem to have taken a shine to Transmutation. It's about exalting or subduing a characteristic from this or that concoction, and while I've got an instinctive grasp of toxic plants, likely inherited by my less than innocent mother, they seem to have grasped a better way to use the little ambrosia we have in their potions, which seem to rely less and less on their father's benevolence (Apollo), and more and more on their skills.

Of that at least, I can be satisfied with.

24 June 2001

We first set sail on the 17th September of the year 2000, that means 280 days spent together, even if most of them have been wasted on me having to recover from the Hydra's battle with Apollo actively opposing his daughters' efforts to nurse me back to health.

Annabeth is growing up reasonably well, from what I can tell. I have insisted on having her practice with English, even if everybody tends to slip more and more into speaking Ancient Greek without thinking about it, apart from that, everything is quiet.

24 July 2001

The attack today has come out of nowhere, but I'm glad it happened, even if the price paid is...

We finally sighted an island, apparently a rocky one, and we cheered.

A boulder of the dimensions of a minivan crashed through our bulwark and killed Helena before we realized what was going on, and the Adamas has proven herself worthy of her name as the following two boulders have caused way less damage than they should have.

Even so, we've got pretty pissed about the whole throwing rocks thing.

Our range isn't enough to counter from the ship, even if Abigail, collaborating with David, has managed to put up a Burning Mirror (roughly 3 meters tall), which coupled with a prayer to Apollo, allowed us to set fire to the forest that we spotted over the cliffs we were approaching, granting us some cover with the smoke as I manoeuvred us nearer to land.

Sadly, not much is known about Lestrigons beyond their human-eating habit.

Of Ulisses is said this: "His soldiers, with a dozen ships, arrive at 'the rocky stronghold of Lamos: Telepylus, the city of the Laestrygonians'."

Lamos is not mentioned again, perhaps being understood as the founder of the city or the name of the island on which the city is situated. In this land, a man who could do without sleep could earn double wages; once as a herdsman of cattle and another as a shepherd, as they worked by night as they did by day. The ships entered a harbor surrounded by steep cliffs, with a single entrance between two headlands. The captains took their ships inside and made them fast close to one another, where it was dead calm.

Odysseus kept his own ship outside the harbor, moored to a rock. He climbed a high rock to reconnoitre but could see nothing but some smoke rising from the ground. He sent two of his company and an attendant to investigate the inhabitants. The men followed a road and eventually met a young woman on her way to the Fountain of

Artakia to fetch some water, who said she was a daughter of Antiphates or Antiphatus, the king, and directed them to his house.

However, when they got there they found a gigantic woman, the wife of Antiphates who promptly called her husband, who immediately left the assembly of the people and upon arrival snatched up one of the men and killed him on the spot, presumably then eating him.

The other two men, Eurylochus and Polites, ran away, but Antiphates raised an outcry, so that they were pursued by thousands of Laestrygonians, who are either giants or very large men and women. They threw vast rocks from the cliffs, smashing the ships, and speared the men like fish. Odysseus made his escape with his single ship because it was not trapped in the harbor; the rest of his company was lost. The surviving crew went next to Aeaea, the island of Circe.

So we find ous in a pickle: Poseidon has kept us away from dry land long enough that our food storages have grown too thin for us to brave the sea without restocking.

If I have to believe to the Odyssey, and I have little reason for not doing so, we're up against thousands of relatively giant people capable of throwing boulders far enough that we can't escape without additional damages to the ship, forcing us to brave the Sea at less than peak form.

And leaving Helena unavenged.

Yeah, that's not happening.

30 July 2001

We recovered Helena's body and performed the correct rites to send her over the Styx, even if a part of me immediately considered pumping her full of venom and making sure that the Lestrigones ate her body.

We left Annabeth on the Adamas with Madison, Hannah and Charles, anchored to a high outcropping of rocks that jut out of the water just enough to give the ship cover from the island. We found signs etched into the stone, washed away by time, but it's pretty clear that it's were Ulysses left his ship back then.

I didn't have to point out what was necessary or what I intended to do, everyone was up to speed with the legends about the Laestrygonians, and they had killed one of ours, mercy was far beyond us.

The only problem is that there is me, David, Jillian, Hailey, Alexandria (eager to avenge her sister), Emily and Charlotte (always eager for war), Hailey (I fear that we'll make a



great use of her gifts in order to survive), Evelyin (our uncharacteristically adrenaline-junkie daughter of Aphrodite), Abigail and Sofia (our healers).

So, 9 demigods against thousands of Laestrygonians: which I feel like I have to remind myself, are giant man-eaters.

26 August 2001

We need to keep moving, at least the deep woods seem to bend relatively easily to my enchantments, and we're kept hidden long enough to sleep. Sadly, the Laestrygonians seem to be quite immune to direct manipulation through the Mist, as we've discovered today when we ambushed a group of 5.

As for their appearances, there is little to say: they're savages, not like they ever needed to develop technology beyond the idea of 'throwing boulders at it' in order to overcome an obstacle. They're around five meters tall, and deceptively fast, albeit not exceptionally bright from an intellectual point of view.

They have very fine senses, in particular, their sense of smell seems to be our worst enemy, since it's dragged by the always present breezes towards our enemies, and my illusions cannot reach that far.

We filled with toxic herbs a couple of those we killed, hoping that they would get eaten by their brethren when found: we had no such luck: Hailey tells me that the poisoned ones 'shall be avenged' by those that found them first.

I find myself grateful for the Hydra's tooth turned-blade that I won off that Hades be damned creature: at least that venom is fatal.

I am acutely aware of the fragility of the tooth, however, that thusly can be used only for sudden stabbings in the flesh: I'm sure that it would break were I to use it for anything else.

16 September 2001

I am forever grateful for the books we stole from Circe. Madison, Annabeth and Hannah have slowly come to understand the few tomes on Transmutation we have on the Adamas, and while they're unable to brew the drinks that Circe seemed to use to turn people into animals (I'm not sure they would work on the Laestrygonians) they tell me that Transmutation is all about 'bringing out a property of something, while smoothing over the others: in any case, the food we eat feels magical even with the lack of ambrosia or nectar.

The routine of the On-Land group consists of brief ambushes for a few days, followed by a hasty retreat in the deeper woods, confounding our traces and hoping that remaining unseen keeps the Laestrygonians from hurling boulders across the thick vegetation (as I said, they don't appear to be particularly bright), then we carefully bring those animals we hunted to the Adamas, along with wood and whatever else Madison tells us to.

It's honestly draining, and at some point, I fear that we'll make a mistake, that will be enough to significantly lower our chances of success.

Poison is out, but how can we eradicate these creatures?

19 September 2001

Evelyn, daughter of Aphrodite, died today to cover for a failed ambush, we didn't succeed in recovering the body.

We need a different method to fight this war, or we'll be all dead before we can manage to make a dent in their numbers.

28 November 2001

The last month had been hectic, apparently a Laestrygonian has taken charge of a group made of few hundreds of them: he is the strongest around, luckily, he's an idiot, and has brought the concept of united against the enemy to the extreme, and he's currently waging war against all those that oppose him: we'll retreat to the Adams until the Laestrygonians are done killing each other.

Hailey may have had a hand in pushing his dreams in the direction we wished for.

We're calling this unbelievably idiotic Laestrygonian Antimetis, and he's by far our favourite, if we can, we'll keep him for last, after all, as Jillian says: 'never keep an enemy from making a mistake'.

25 December 2001

Christmas doesn't mean that much for us, given our heritage and situation, still, some gifts (for Annabeth in particular) have appeared out of nowhere: we threw a quiet party in the galley, and we finished our reserves of wine: once we're done with this war, I'll have Charles sing grapes out of the bodies of the Laestrygonians, at least their bodies can be useful to something.

4 January 2002

Even if it's winter, the cold doesn't seem to take. The wind is a bit sharper than what we were used to in the summer, but the rain remains the same, and the temperatures are clearly ignoring the seasons, which is great, since we can keep moving in and out from the deep woods without issues.

7 January 2002

We've lost the count of how many Laestrygonians are left even if it appears like our beloved Antimetis perished in his attempt of taking over his people. Luckily, he had several sons, and Hailey is heavily playing with their dreams, if we manage to push them in the same direction of the father, then they'll likely kill each other once they're done subjugating their own people.

From what I knew Antiphates was king of the man-eating giants at the time of Odysseus, but now they're separated in 'tribes' that divide among them the territories of the island. There is potential there if our magical influencing of Antimetis' brood fails.

17 March 2002

The last two months have been hectic, it's difficult to express in words how much work it is to keep up false flag operations among a population of five meters tall idiots.

On a related note, the Laestrygonians seem to have completely forgotten that all the trouble began with our arrival and the ship they failed to sink, so keeping quiet and playing them one against another appears to be the wisest option.

On an unrelated note, on July 12 Annabeth turns nine, I'm writing this down because Abigail seems incensed that I tend to ignore birthdays. It's not like they actually matter, do they? We tend to throw random parties every time we can get away with it, even if I realize that they're less than fantastic for a child that doesn't get drunk.

Leaving her on the Adamas is still the only option, being discovered now would set us back significantly, and while she's witnessed her dose of horrors since she ran away from home, I'd like to keep that dose to a minimum, knowing the kind of shitfest that Fate is brewing.

I need to figure out a way to say 'Fuck You' to Fate.

On an unrelated note, I'm still waiting for the 'change' that I have bargained with Hekate for: the sea remains sluggish in its answers to my will, while there is no 'switch' or power in my gut capable of summoning either storms or earthquakes.

10 May 2002

To our count, there are less than 1500 Laestrygonians left. Sadly, they somewhat realized how few they are, and thusly happily follow their peaceful (if we can call him so) man-eater in charge, who has killed the one before him because he wished for the bloodshed to keep going. I want to point out that people that stupid and that strong seem capable of driving themselves on the brink of extinction in little more than a year (even if we helped them along).

Sand has been successfully transmuted in extremely fine glass, and in particular, Annabeth has thought about using some more Transmutation (I ignore the mechanics) to keep the edge of each minuscule shard of glass as sharp as humanly possible. Given our heritage, I suspect that the result will be more than simply terrifying, so I gave order to keep Annabeth in the dark about the applications I thought for this.

David and Madison crafted goggles and masks in order to keep ourselves from accidentally dying or going blind as we could inhale the glass-powder. Just to be sure, everyone is been given earmuffs that filter the air: while they dampen the sound somewhat, I still think that it's better than the risk of grinding holes in our eardrums.

The constant breezes that roam across the island will be our carriers, it's my hope that if the glass-powder won't kill them, it will at least severely blind them, and now that I think about it, it could even scratch their airways so that they have difficulty breathing (I fear that they are far too sturdy to be properly damaged by this, but we're still vastly outnumbered.)

10 June 2002

We dispersed the powder around what passes for their city while being mindful of the direction in which the wind blows: it should give us enough time for the damage to be optimal. We attack during the Summer' Solstice, since I fear that some god could interfere during an open battle.

**Second Part:**

**Abigail's POV**

24 June 2002

We ran quickly across the trees, being careful to let our feet produce only the faintest sound against the roots and rocks we moved upon: we had quickly learned that leaving tracks for the Laestrygonians to follow was an awful idea, even so, I felt a strange mixture of tiredness and elation at the thought that we had come so close to performing something worthy of the greatest legends.

Or we soon would, in any case.

I was Abigail, daughter of Apollo, and for all that pride and self-appreciation was a common trait among my brothers and sisters, I couldn't truly think anything less of us for that. We deserved each praise we were so ready to rain upon ourselves.

Almost a whole year of what amounts to an endless series of ambushes and false flag operations in hostile territory, led by Icarus, in order to avenge a single member of the crew. I wanted to scoff at the thought, Icarus was a powerful and dangerous demigod, there was no denying that, but he was also extremely callous and ruthless when the situation asked for it. *I wonder if he would use my death with the same ease in order to launch the Adamas against another impossible task?*

*It had been a long time since we last lost someone,* I shook my head as I ducked under a pine branch, *and it's true that everyone bar Annabeth sort of knew what we were getting into, but... Even this whole Odyssey is done more to spite the gods than to help Thalia, I think.*

I frowned, ignoring my undisciplined thoughts as I jumped over a small creek, my breath was a bit heavy, but nothing else betrayed that we'd been running for hours in the wilderness of the island.

I slowed to a trot as I saw the others crouch hidden in the underbrush of a small clearing before quickly climbing up a tree and unslinging my bow from my back, preparing an arrow I turned my head to look around, my ears managing to focus both on the whispered conversation we were having and the surroundings.

"It's done." Icarus voice cut clearly across the small clearing, reaching each of us without fail, despite the fact that he was looking towards the broken wooden gates of what passed as the Laestrygonians' capital.

"What do you mean, 'it's done'?" I frowned as I looked forward, "Unless the last of them killed himself once he realized he was the last, we still need to deal with at least one of them, don't we?"

"You can thank Hailey for that, it turns out that six months of nightmares and sleep without rest turns even bloodthirsty cannibals into a bumbling mess, the last few died of consumption, or got done in by others of their kind, convinced that eating each other would heal them." Icarus turned towards us then, and I suppressed a shiver at his far too-wide grin.

Months of unending ambushes and constant vigilance had made him even sharper than normal, more relentless, and I knew that if I were to look myself in the mirror, I would see the same differences. Wasn't I there every step of the way? Wasn't I the one that supported him when the others raised doubts about his decision of pursuing genocide against giant cannibals?

A part of me, a... frail part of me, the part that hurt because of my inability to fit in before reaching Camp Halfblood, the same part that had once urged me to simply fade in the background of the Camp's activities, if only because there weren't other viable alternatives, had shivered and wilted under Icarus' expectant gaze, again and again, leaving behind what I could only guess was the divinity I inherited from Apollo, my ever absent father.

Like for many of the others, when Icarus first approached us, not long after his declaration after the loss of Thalia, I had been conflicted. On one side, he urged me to leave what little calm and acceptance I had managed to find after years in the mortal world, where dyslexia and ADHD hadn't helped when I saw things that simply weren't there according to everybody else; on the other hand, he offered a direction for what I knew I was wasting.

What was the point of being trained in archery, in the art of the sword, what was the point of performing impossible feats in the safe quiet of Halfblood Camp's obstacle course? What was the point of my whole life, when I knew that eventually, I would venture into the mortals' world once more, only to be killed when my guard or strength failed?

I could push through dyslexia, a few tools to aid learning here and there would not have been amiss, and surely my natural ability with greek could make me obtain a degree of some sort, and yet... the idea of being born as a demigoddes, only to work behind a desk like every other mortal did out of necessity sat ill within me.

Icarus knew that, he knew that because he claimed he felt the same way, and at the time, I remembered thinking that he truly was living up to his namesake: intruding upon another's Quest first, only to announce to the world and the gods that he would be taking a task upon himself, going so far that he *hit* the Oracle, and tussled with a Huntress, wielding his knowledge of the greek lore as skillfully as a blade... Icarus was truly something else, of that I had no doubt, even when I didn't know him personally.

The occasional debauchery that he brought into Halfblood Camp was something hilarious and very welcome, and if he managed that only because he somewhat managed to befriend Mr. D., well, who was I to point it out?

And so, knowing that we would probably be killed by a god willing to punish us for our hubrys, we had set sail, and since then... yes, we lost someone, Julia and Eric in that first freak storm, and Helena to the monsters we had just finished exterminating. And we had to put up with the extremely aggravating Annabeth, which forced us to spike her water

with something to put her asleep when we gave a party with Mr. D.'s blessing, letting out whatever lingering tension we had. Even so, facing the Storm, the Hydra, Circe and then the man-eaters felt... good.

There wasn't a true reason or necessity behind most of what we did, but we could, and that was enough.

I put away the arrow I had previously notched on my bow and straightened my crouched position, slowly walking closer to Icarus, who had turned back towards the empty city: "We'll need to set up a few pyres, but after that we can bring the others from the Adamas and finish what we have from the galley." he spoke confidently, and it managed to steal a smile from me.

To call the place we walked in 'a city' was giving it more credit than it deserved, the houses were proportioned to the 5 meters tall man-eaters, but they were roughly built out of simple wood. So, while climbing the barricade slash wall that the man-eaters had built around their settlement resulted challenging (for its height if for nothing else) I was less than impressed about our conquest, and I could tell, the others were too.

"Well, we'd be better off by setting everything on fire and living on the Adamas, the gods know at least it's comfortable." I muttered as I walked around, my eyes scanning the empty streets.

On the side of the large plaza, there was a pile of boulders, presumably the one where the Laestrygonians kept their ammunition, given the rather spectacular view on the bay, it seemed like a wise place to keep them. Which, now that I thought about it, was pretty against-character of them: their stupidity had been our best weapon during our brief war after all.

I kept walking besides Icarus after he split us off both to look for stuff we could pillage and wood for a big pyre for the Laestrygonians that hadn't been eaten by their own kind: "The point was exterminating them, not conquering the island." he spoke while my eyes kept scanning the surroundings.

"Well, to be fair, it's kind of obvious that the two things are one and the same." I quipped with a grin, surprised that Icarus, with all of his knowledge and mad ambition, had apparently not considered the consequences of the campaign he had set us upon, "at least we have somewhere to return to that is safe from monsters and not Half-Blood Camp."

Icarus whipped his head towards me as my words left my mouth, surprise clearly etched on his features as he asked: "You don't wish to return to the Camp after we're done?"

I scoffed, not buying his disbelief for a single second: "Camp was the best option we had since we didn't have a home in the normal world, but do you seriously think any of us will return to obeying Chiron and Mr. D after what we've accomplished?"

Icarus stared at me for a while then, slowly coming to a halt: "To found a city, not in name of the gods, not under a patron, but built by demigods, for demigods?"

"Calling the city New Athens would ensure that no god would strike us down from the sky." I pointed out immediately, knowing that the natural instinct of Icarus would be naming the whole island as an insult to Olympus out of spite.

As we walked past another alley and into a plaza, I realized that we had completed a circle of sorts from our starting point, since I could spot the small mountain of boulders that the man-eaters had stacked in clear view of the bay below.

Icarus opened his mouth to answer when a deep chuckle made his head snap to the side, where a man was chained to the wall, his steel-grey eyes staring at us under a crown of shadows cast by his brow.

"How the fuck did you manage to get yourself captured again?" Icarus asked before I could free the man, and I frowned when his hand clamped around my shoulder, stopping me from helping the poor sod.

"I'd imagine that I cannot trick my way out of my binds, giving to the young daughter of Athena something that your group already had likely angered the Kindly Ones, and so I'm here once more, to have my guts eaten during the day while they heal at night." and as he spoke, I instinctively recoiled, because clearly, the prisoner was no human. There was something, both in his voice and in the way he stared at us, that put me on edge, and if I had heard correctly...

"But how did you land here before us? For that matter, how did you leave the island where I found you at all?" Icarus asked Prometheus, because who else could he be? My eyes found the captain of the *Adamas* once more, knowing that he had let out a big piece of what had happened after we found Annabeth on our ship.

Prometheus' eyes seemed to shine with mirth at his questions, but even so, I could tell that he was assessing us both: "There was only a way open for me, only one path that could hide me from unwelcome eyes, and so I took it." as he spoke, I saw Icarus frown in confusion, only for that confusion to turn into... *eagerness? What is Icarus about to drag us into?* "You already know what I'm talking about, young Skyholder."

The head of the titan turned towards an impressive stack of boulders on one side of the plaza, where only then I spotted a large crack that seemed to be the opening of a large cavern. My eyes, acute as they were given my heritage, found the oddity on the surface: among cracks and the ashes from the pyres of the burning man-eaters, a single  $\Delta$  shone of a silvery-blue light.

"The Labyrinth." Icarus whispered, and I felt both cold dread and excitement pool in my guts.



AN

I know that Italics gets annoying after a while, so to symbolize writing, I underlined everything.

I more or less overlooked the actual raid of the island because it's far less interesting than the MC interactions with this or that immortal. Even so, I told a little of Ares that I wanted to point out for a while now.

While Marte (roman Ares) was a blend of actual battle and military strategy, the greek Ares is much more visceral and violent, for he's the spirit of battle more than the god of war, impulsive and bloodthirsty, and I can see why he tried to jumpstart a war, since, in the Half-blood camp, there is very little that can actually please him.

Having said that, from Circe's island Icarus gained a little more understanding of shape-changing magic, since he had to dispel it when Circe tried to turn the satyr into a goat, and starts to figure out how to make count the result of his title as 'Skyholder'.

The crew of the Adamas is made by over the top demigods, they're almost asleep during the travel proper, coming to life only for the challenges that they meet. And they are 'over the top' both in the good and bad sense, as you've seen. Thanks to Hestia gifting them her ember to lit up the brazier they hold in the galley, they are a very cohesive group, but when push comes to shove, acts of savagery are well within their capabilities.

I needed something to become a time sink of sorts and to give me an excuse to thin a bit the crew, so to speak, enough that I don't need to keep referencing my list in order to figure out who I'm writing about. And since I picked Ares from the deck at the end of the previous chapter (and foreshadowed his interest when he set a boar against Icarus on Prometheus' island), I thought it interesting to bring it to a climax with the Lestrignons.

So, the Lestrignes are man-eaters in mythology, and I thought: since they're stuck on an island in the middle of the Sea of Monsters, what would they eat? Placing here a Labirynth's entrance sounded like a good wrap.

And shifting to Abigail's POV gave me a bit of leeway about the plans inside of the MC's head, so I don't need to exactly spell out all that he's thinking. It's done to add a bit of colour to Icarus, which doesn't spend all that time thinking about his emotions, preferring instead to focus on the several mythological episodes that he encounters.

Anyway, I roughly planned out the rest of this story, and yes it will involve both New Rome and the Giants, before breaking into different pantheons (I haven't read

anything past Kronos' war, so I'll need to skim the books eventually), in any case, we're looking to an escalation train that I've never seen done in a PJO fic.

For now, we went from needing greek letters and focus in order to manipulate the mist, to holding the sky, to surviving Ladon, to face the storm, the Hydra, Circe and now man-eaters.

And in the next chapter, we'll finally get started with a more organic sequence of events, since I've realized that roaming endlessly the Sea of Monsters without a guiding plot is cool when you're Homer writing the Odyssey, or Oda drawing One Piece, but it simply doesn't work when you're cloud9stories playing with fanfiction.

One cannot simply avoid what the Fates place on his path, and while it's something that Icarus thought resolved with Annabeth, it is clearly not so easy.

And I know that this chapter has been somewhat a letdown, but it was extremely necessary.

## Chapter 16: Of Beginnings and Ends

### Of Beginnings and Ends

24 June 2002

I stared down at the bound Titan after his words and indication revealed to me what I knew was to be the next step of my journey, and even as I contemplated freeing him, the short chat I just had with Abigail came to the forefront of my mind, giving me pause. A place where demigods could live peacefully... There was potential there, especially given its location in the Sea of Monsters. If we left, we wouldn't be able to return, given the metaphysical bullshit that defined the whole area, but if there was a way to harness the evershifting properties of the Sea...

*While the isolation from the mortals is somewhat forced because of the everpresent monsters hiding among them, it will be absolute unless I figure out a way for the people of... dare I say it? My city... sure as Hades I'm not calling the city New Athens... and Prometheus is a crafter, is he not?* I thought as I looked over his bound form, knowing that the choice was mine, otherwise, it seemed unlikely that I would have met him once more.

"You're not actually thinking about freeing him, are you?" Abigail's voice stole me away from my musings, forcing me to think about the undoubtedly heated opinions my crew was going to share with me once the daughter of Apollo told them about Prometheus.

"He had nothing to offer me before Annabeth freed him," I commented off-handedly as I turned my back on the knowing glint in the Titan's eyes: "But things have changed a bit

now, can you send over Jillian, David and Hailey? We need to decide what to do with him, it's the second time he appears in front of me, it looks like the Moirai want me to interact with the poor sod." *I wonder if he can figure out some sort of compass that will always lead to this island...*

"I don't appreciate being referred to as a 'poor sod'." I expertly ignored the mockingly wounded voice of the Titan in order to stare at Abigail, who hesitated for a second before she went looking for those I had asked for.

Prometheus waited until the daughter of Apollo was out of hearing before he started his sales pitch: "So we meet again, and under the same circumstances."

I gave him an unimpressed look: "Spare me."

"You've already decided to free me." he floored me with his insight, making me sigh in annoyance. And the worst was that he wasn't that wrong. I hadn't freed him at our first meeting for two reasons. Reason number one: Zeus was one of the few Olympians that I was sure wasn't openly against our free-roaming, and opposing a punishment dished out by him didn't sound particularly wise. Reason number two: he simply didn't have anything interesting to offer me. At the time I was more concerned with keeping up with our travel, we had just sailed and two of ours were already taken by the sea... the moral of the crew risked to be broken before we actually got started.

"I'm thinking about it, but I really don't need you to start moving the pieces to overthrow Olympus' King." I eyed him knowingly, grinning at how his eyes widened at my direct admission of knowing what was yet to happen.

"I could swear on the Styx that I'm not going to..." I stopped him by shaking my head and walking towards the incoming group.

"So," David was the first to address the elephant in the room once I reached them: "What are we going to do with the Titan?" he eyed Annabeth speculatively, "Now that we don't have to guard him against the overzealous brat at least."

Annabeth huffed in irritation and took a threatening step towards the son of Hephaestus only to be stopped by her sister's hand landing on her shoulder in order to pull her back. Jillian then spoke loudly enough to be heard by the whole group: "This time perhaps you could avoid butting in, don't you agree?" the saccharine smile that accompanied her words sent a shiver down my spine.

"Abigail pointed out that we basically conquered the island, I'm not that eager to abandon it," I started, "But I know that we're not done yet travelling, so stopping here is not an option, splitting up is an idea..."

"You want to send people in the Labirynth?" Jillian hissed turning towards me, and I cringed a bit.

"Abigail talks too much I see," I groaned as I turned towards Hailey, who had yet to say anything.

The daughter of Hypno shrugged, deciding to not share her opinion, and I was left with an annoyed Jillian glaring at me.

I sighed: "The Labirynth seems to be a good way to both look for Pan and find a way in and out of the island without getting lost at sea."

"Oh, so you not only want to *enter* the biggest deadly trap ever conceived, but you want to figure out a way to... what? Use it as your hidden highway across the world?" Jillian's hand reached for the dagger she had on her waist, as if she was going to kill me in order to not waste time with my admittedly foolish idea.

"If he succeeds, however, we'd have this island as a safe base, and well, roaming and randomly testing ourselves was kind of the point of the whole trip on board of the Adamas, was it not?" Hailey decided to butt in, only to amend an instant later: "And yes, finding the Golden Fleece in order to Save Thalia is a good enough side-project, as well as looking for Pan, Charles wouldn't be here otherwise."

David simply hummed in thought before rolling his shoulders: "I kind of want to set up a proper forge, there is much yet to be used from the haul on Circe's island."

Jillian whirled on him and made to talk only for me to cut in: "I was thinking to ask him to teach David how to build something to navigate Dedalus' creation, and something to always find this island, we could place the... magical compass? machine? bullshit-GPS? both on the Adamas and with the group braving the Labyrinth, and have a stable, safe place only for us."

"An island for less than 20 demigods?" Annabeth quirked an eyebrow in a sarcastic manner only to be shushed by her elder sister.

"There aren't many demigods that manage to become older than seventeen unless they never leave Camp, and eventually they leave out of boredom, only to die meaninglessly when they let their guard down," Hailey shrugged, "It was one of the reasons why Icarus had it so easy in recruiting us."

"I don't want everyone to come here." I cut her off, "but this could be a place for those like us that want... more. The Adamas is our thing, but there will eventually be others like us, and if we manage to survive we'll want a place to... relax, I guess?" I was mostly winging it, but there was something incredibly appealing about founding an entire city. Who knew, maybe I could forge an entire myth out of it?

"You're the one in charge, Icarus," David pointed out without a hint of doubt: "It's been a wild ride up until now, it will likely keep being so, and it would be nice having an easily defensible safe heaven where we're not forced to follow the Camp's rulebook."

"So you agree?" I asked, only to receive a collective snort as an answer.

"You weren't looking for our support," Hailey half-laughed, only to be joined by an exasperated Jillian: "Only to confirm that even if you're batshit crazy, we'd still follow you. We will, by the way."

I found myself feeling gratitude towards the demigods surrounding me. It was one thing to have them obey orders when in battle, even if more or less everybody already knew what to do, it was a wholly different matter to see them not freaking out for a single instant when I proposed something that, as far as I knew, had never been attempted before.

Then my thoughts returned towards the foolish-mad-awe-inspiring idea that Abigail made me consider: founding a city on the island. *We'll need to name the island at some point, names are powerful and all of that jazz... and we'll need a patron eventually, of that I have little doubt. But who?*

While Dionysus was undoubtedly an option, I was unsure about the repercussions that said patron would have on the *nature* of the city, nevermind upon the people of the Adamas. Rome had chosen Mars as their patron, and they spawned the most terrifying empire ever seen, but I couldn't do the same with Ares, he was the embodiment of battle, and while he was certainly among those rooting for the Adamas' success, he was also the same idiot that would try to engineer a war in the heart of Olympus itself because he was *bored*.

In general, I couldn't genuinely trust anyone among the Olympians, but asking for a patron among minor deities would likely offend the twelve Olympians. It was an annoying conundrum: I would need someone separated from the divine politics, someone that wouldn't be a hassle to deal with, someone that wouldn't oppose my decisions, no matter how bat-shit insane they would end up looking like.

"Icarus?" David's hand landed heavily on my shoulder: "Are you still with us?" he asked, making me abandon my rapidly spiralling thoughts. *I'll think about it later.*

"Have you ever worked with Stone?" I asked in return, making him blink in surprise.

"I mean... a little..." he answered tentatively: "But I can figure it out, at least we won't be lacking stone as a material, but we'll need a shitload of blessed bronze in order to set up defences as I like them."

My eyes found Jillian's while I returned to a point we needed to address: "If we're actually keeping the island, besides having Prometheus teach us how to always find it, we'll need to fortify not only the eventual city, but the whole island."

Jillian nodded thoughtfully: "Basically the island is one giant cliff with an opening that leads directly into the Bay, so building a proper Harbour would be the place where to

start, we can go by terracing multiple levels until we reach the summit of the island, from there we would have the advantage upon any invading force, ballistas and greek fire could rain death upon the vast majority of monsters..."

"We are too few to actually build a city, you'll realize that." Hailey pointed out, making everyone roll their eyes even as the daughter of Hypno snorted. Once more, everyone was acutely aware of the fact that we were going to claim the island and build a city on it because we *could*, and that was reason enough. What was the point in dreaming conservatively? We might as well go for broke.

"Charles and Hannah can coerce vegetables and what not to grow." Piped up Annabeth, remembering everyone that she was still *here*.

I sighed, eyeing her briefly before nodding in assent, it *was* a good idea.

"We're still banking everything upon having Prometheus tell us of a way to find again this place." the young daughter of Athena went ahead: "But with Transmutation, it shouldn't be impossible, I mean... Sophie was looking into harmonically linking two materials, so..."

I felt my eyebrows rise in surprise at that revelation, and I looked questioningly at David, who was supposed to be the Head Engineer and thusly should have known about the possibility. He shrugged dismissively: "Magic is not my thing, but I know enough that I can safely say that it's unlikely that we'll find a way to actually navigate either the Sea of Monsters or the Labyrinth."

After everyone got a task or another, we decided to call upon everyone and return to the Adamas, where we were going to make Annabeth fall into a deep slumber so that we could go ritualistically insane in order to properly celebrating our victory in a war against an army of giant man-eaters.

26 June 2002

"I'm the Titan of forethought. I know what's going to happen." Prometheus taunted me once I walked back to his bound form, two days after our final defeat of the Laestrygonians.

Once more, I was forced to recognize that his bearing and quiet confidence were used masterfully, because even as he was bound naked to a lump of rock, he looked like a king holding court.

"I often thought that my foreknowledge was an advantage, and that it would allow me to actually *change* something." I found myself answering him: "I've likely felt the same as you did when you tricked Annabeth into freeing you the last time, and yer, here we are, the moirai have decided that it wasn't your time to be free yet."

Prometheus allowed a grimace to shine upon his face, making me relax marginally the muscles of my shoulders as my hands slid over the smooth shaft of wood that I brought with me from the Adamas. The staff I was wielding had been obtained from the branch of the Tree of the Golden Apples, and had been waiting in the captain's quarters until now, until I found a use for it.

"I remember fondly my meeting with **Atlas**," I spoke quietly, "he ripped a whole branch from the Queen's tree, and I managed to salvage not only the wood, but even an apple from that ill-fated quest."

"And now you're asking me what would happen if you were to eat an apple?" Prometheus asked me with a raised eyebrow, "No, that's something you could have figured out on your own, and you're not so blatant... Ah..." he sighed, a sly smile comparing on his face while his eyes trailed upon the wood of the tree: "You want to blossom another Tree of Golden Apples here on *your* brand new island, don't you?"

I frowned minutely at the Titan's knowing gaze, I had thought about it the day before: "We'd need to be many more in order to be able to defend the island if that was the case."

"Then you're wiser than most demigods, Skyholder, because you're not ready for the kind of attention that a Queen's Tree would bring." Prometheus nodded as if to genuinely compliment me: "But I don't have the knowledge you seek, even if I can direct you towards someone who does... you know my price."

I frowned in displeasure at his answer, and for an instant, I felt tempted. A tree of golden apples that everyone on the Adamas could enjoy, I only had to free the bound Titan, and he would send me on my way. Then I forced myself to recognize my priorities, and slammed closed the doors that led my thoughts in that direction.

"How can I safely navigate the Labyrinth without a clear-sighted mortal or Ariadne's Thread?" I tilted my head, hoping that Prometheus would pull out of his ass the solution to our most pressing problem. *Didn't he run in the Labyrinth at the first opportunity in order to avoid Zeus' punishment? He should have a solution.*

The grim smile that I received made my shoulders slump in defeat: "The Labyrinth is more than a Living Maze of Stone Corridors, to choose right from left is easy enough, but meaningless, because it's not the distance you walk with your feet, but the one you cross with your mind and soul that matters."

"Why telling me this?" it wasn't in Prometheus' nature to answer truthfully if it didn't serve his purpose, and I wasn't going to take anything he said as face value in any case.

"You asked for a safe way to navigate the Labyrinth, such a way does not exist to my knowledge, and so I answered truthfully, the Moirai have made their opinion about my trickery clear since our first meeting, you'll need to ask for something that I can give,

either a single truth or an artefact, and in exchange for my freedom, I'll uphold my part of the agreement."

I crossed my arms in displeasure as I tried to discern the meaning behind each word of the bound Titan. He was being somewhat truthful, even if he wasn't saying anything more than strictly necessary, and I could somewhat understand him, in his position, I would have done the same.

After a few minutes spent eyeing mistrustfully the Titan, I blinked as his words somewhat clicked with my knowledge of Dedalus' masterpiece: "Is that why Dedalus managed to hide even from Tanathos in his Labyrinth? Because immortals do not change, and thusly are unable to navigate it?"

I spotted Prometheus' eyes gleam appreciatively at my words, and I received another approving nod: "You're far less dull than I had previously thought."

*This still doesn't solve my problem.* I thought bitterly as I watched the Bound Titan. *How did I manage to trick Atlas? By freaking him out, and I managed to understand him enough to be sure about my decision to hold the sky back then... can I do the same with Prometheus?* Somewhat, I doubted it. Where Atlas was all wisdom and impossible determination, I couldn't read Prometheus.

I knew that he wanted to be free, I knew that he had tricked the gods into eating bones at the time of the first sacrifices, I knew that he gifted fire to Mankind, I knew, in the end, only small facts about him, but that didn't allow me to understand the *why*. He was self-serving enough, but he didn't shy away from doing what he wanted, even when it carried heavy consequences. The calm quiet in his eyes was proof enough that he didn't regret a single one of his choices.

It was a discordant behaviour. Atlas had been quite linear in comparison, the personality of Prometheus was hidden behind his masterful control both over his reactions and the words he used. And for the life of mine, I couldn't tie together what I knew of the Titan.

In common belief, Prometheus developed into a master craftsman, and he was associated with fire and the creation of mortals. So I was pretty sure that if anyone besides Hapaestus could build us some sort of bullshit-compass that always pointed towards this island, it would be the Bound Titan.

My hands clamped down on the staff that I brought to the meeting with Prometheus while my mind fruitlessly sought to find a deal that would be more to my advantage than his.

After a while, I knew that I had to decide. Asking Prometheus what he could build would give away even more than what the Titan had likely been able to discern already.



It didn't help that Prometheus was staring at me with his annoyingly knowing gaze, his grey eyes speaking of ever turning gears and the industrial revolution. "You're recognized as the 'craftsman'. The best after Hapaestus himself," I started, my eyes landing briefly on the Titan's smirk before returning to stare him in the eyes: "could you take as apprentice one of my crewmates? He's a son of Hephaestus..."

But even as I spoke the Titan was shaking his head: "And change these chains for the rules of this apprenticeship? No. But I can teach how to build what you're looking for: a compass capable of leading you back here... or something else... something capable of making mankind complete the same jump they made when I gave them Fire."

Prometheus smiled widely at my visible hesitation: "But you don't care about mankind do you? They're not among your people, and so you genuinely aren't concerned."

I forced myself to ignore the grinning visage of the Titan, and with a sigh, and feeling an oncoming headache, I made my choice.

2 July 2002

The opening into the stack of boulders led into a narrow, rocky corridor that was barely lit by the afternoon's sun. Both the floor and the walls that met at an angle over their heads were made of grey slates of stone, each looking like it had been roughly broken and forced into place, and that, accompanied by the slightly damp air that had nothing to do with the sea outside, made for a less than welcoming environment.

*Which, given that the Labyrinth is almost singularly responsible for half the disappearances in the U.S.A. and the 80% of people freaking out about being kidnapped by aliens, is somewhat welcome. People don't normally explore random places if they don't look like Wonderland.* I thought as I walked inside Dedalus' ruinous trap.

"Thank you." Charles spoke for the first time since he had pleaded his case with the others of the Adamas, making me smile.

"There is nothing to thank me for, you're on board to look for Pan, your ability to sense the Vellum is simply another rather useful trait of yours." that gained me a nod from the satyr.

"Besides, your bullshit music helped us speed along the setting up of the fortified camp," said the third and last member of our expedition with a wide smile: "by the time we're back, I wonder what upgrades David will have placed on the Adamas and the island."

I smiled at Abigail's sunny disposition even as I kept walking forward, feeling some measure of pride in our past accomplishments: David had worked under Prometheus for a total of three days. Three days without sleep, three days with breaks only to drink and eat in order to learn how to build the pyxida that I held in my left hand.

It was more or less akin to a pocket watch as large as the palm of my hand, and in it a single hand pointed towards the island that we were slowly but surely leaving behind. My eyes roamed over the perfectly circular celestial bronze, knowing that it wasn't a guarantee of safe return. Having a direction isn't enough when in a Labyrinth, that much was obvious, if you need to right and your only choices are up and left, then you're left up to Tyche's mercy, and it wasn't something we could rely on.

With a sigh, I clapped closed the magical compass in my hand, my thumb sliding quietly over the greek inscription over its cover: *πυξίδα*. *Not very original, but it will do.*

While David was busy with learning the craft of the exceptional instrument from the Titan, I had Jillian organize a plan, with the input from everyone, that would turn the city of barracks and defenceless island into a stronghold that a handful of demigods would be able to defend without too many issues. While our satyr, helped along by the daughter of Demetra took care of the vegetation.

Before our intervention, the Laestrygonian's 'city' was separated from the Bay by a steep stretch of jungle, while only after a few days, there was already a path that led from the slowly growing harbour to the vast plateau that stood in place of the wooden, giant-sized barracks that we burned down in order to make space for a tentative Acropolis of sorts.

We were too few in order to actually name both the island and a city, but we had to start somewhere, did we not?

I tilted my head to look at my two companions: Charles was wearing a set of light leather armour, while he had a Pan's flute hanging from a thread around his neck, a wooden club secured on his back, and a celestial bronze dagger at his left hip.

Abigail was wearing her usual mesh of leather and celestial bronze armour: she had a thick breastplate and both shinguards and vambraces made of the gleaming metal, while her shoulders were left with more freedom of movement thanks to the leather pauldrons. Her celestial bronze bow was secured around her torso, while she had two quivers, one over her shoulder and one secured on the small of her back, both ready to offer their arrows to the daughter of Apollo. Still, she had a celestial bronze dagger secured at her left calf and a short sword at her left hip. She had declined the leather helm that she had used for the entire duration of the Laestrygonian's War, claiming that she needed her ears free to catch what her perfect vision missed.

I was the more heavily armoured, wearing a full set of celestial bronze protections, coupled with the ever-useful celestial bronze dagger on my side and a steel bowie knife strapped to my thigh. I had a leather harness over my torso, where we had secured some provisions for a voyage of which we admittedly did not know the length of. Chainmail had been shaped in a safe pocket in the side of my breastplate, where I held the magic compass that was our only tentative guide in case we ever managed to turn back towards our island.

But above all, it was the spear in my right hand that most reassured me with its comfortable weight. In all honesty, it was less a traditional European spear and more a Japanese naginata, with a half meter long straight blade at the end. The two meters tall shaft had been carved from the branch of Hera's tree, that I had obtained years before, and it was capped at the bottom by a ferrule in celestial bronze, while the curved blade had been forged in a mismatched amalgamation of celestial bronze and Damascus steel that rippled ominously in the dim light of the Labyrinth.

One would think that a shafted weapon would put me at a disadvantage in a restricted area such as the Labyrinth never-ending corridors, but they would be wrong. Yes, there were points in which the path narrowed and forced us to walk in a single file, but more often than not, two trucks could have run side by side in the vast corridors without touching each other.

"So..." Abigail's musical voice cut the quiet after an undetermined amount of time: "what's up with the scary spear?"

I smiled inwardly as the question enlisted a reaction out of Charles as well, who had undoubtedly held his tongue up to this point out of a mixture of wariness and distaste for all things metal.

"It's more a naginata than an actual spear, I think." I replied without answering: "Eventually I hope to name this just as I named the Adamas, but I cannot tell yet."

"I was talking about the steel part of the weapon, dumbass."

I snorted quietly as we walked on a suddenly cobbled path, my eyes tearing through most of the illusions that tried to ensnare us and keeping my companions from falling into the minor traps that we encountered on our path: "Celestial Bronze doesn't cut mortals, who are deemed 'not-important-enough', but mortals can very much kill me, so I deemed prudent to have something to strike back with."

"Oh..." Abigail replied: "Now that I think about it, why don't we go around with rifles and celestial bronze bullets?"

I nodded appreciatively at the question, choosing the less dangerous way at the first crossroads we met. I felt like I had a sixth sense indicating the way, if it was because my senses had grown beyond the physical realm or because Hekate ruled over crossroads, and thusly I had inherited a bit of power over that aspect of her domain, I wasn't sure, but I wasn't going to look a gifted horse in the mouth in this case.

"Does music come from my flute or from me?" Charles choose to tackle that question, "Monsters die both because of the one wielding the weapon and the weapon itself, Herakles used a giant club, but when he started it was simply an admittedly big-ass Oak branch."

I nodded thoughtfully as we took another turn left, abandoning the cobbled path for one covered by thick slates of stone, while the walls around us seemed to be made by silken veils that shuddered randomly in an absent breeze.

The silence was part of the Labyrinth, I realized after a while, it was creeping and constant, heavy as a woollen cloak that slowed our progress.

**I am free.** The thought and mantra rose on its own from the depth of my mind, and for a split second, I remembered the Weight of the Sky. The fake silence, that carried with it an enchantment that I couldn't divine, rippled and fell apart like mist under the sun as I smartly struck the ground with the bottom of my hafted weapon.

I felt the oppressive silence recede as if it was a living being, watching us just beyond the reach of the noise I made.

We walked for what felt like days, pushing through the tiredness while walking while on foot, until suddenly, instead of an empty crossroads, we met a small plaza with a broken fountain in the middle.

The walls surrounding us were made of a grey stone, while the roof above us was covered in a large mosaic-covered by moss that shouldn't have been able to grow in the dryness of the environment. On the opposite side of the fountain, however, in front of two doors that stood a few meters apart, was the element that immediately captivated most of my attention.

It was a short man, or something reminiscent of one, who stood hidden by a light brown cloak, his twin visages each facing in the opposite direction while he eyed us with the corner of his eye.

"Hello, younglings," spoke one face, covering with a smile the annoyed rumbling of his counterpart: "I am Janus, and I have a choice to offer."

AN

**A bit of logistics at the start, mostly to clarify that Icarus has no idea whatsoever about the whole 'patron' thing, but he recognizes that it would be wise to have one. The whole reason *d'etre* of the MC is to be free and doing what the fuck he wants, while keeping up with defying whatever standard or limit he finds on his path. (Among the reviews, well done to those that spotted the MC's increasingly manic and behaviour and growing ambition, I hope you'll like what I've planned to justify it).**

**As a hint, I'll tell you that I've put a lot of foreshadowing here and there.**

The island is easily defensible in the Sea of Monsters, and given how the island is actually structured (basically a tall mountain that with steep cliffs all around if not for the opening in the Bay (I've taken the description straight out of the Odyssey)), founding a city in it is not that bad, and since I'm reading Tolkien right now, I couldn't not-think of Númenor.

I know that someone expected a rehash of the MC understanding the Titan's name. I have chosen differently for several reasons: 1) I didn't want to reduce this fic to the MC going around and 'understanding' mythological characters, 2) sometimes metaknowledge and intelligence aren't enough to trick your way out of a problem, like Icarus did in chapters 7-8, 3) I don't want to build his name out of every meeting he has with an immortal.

I hope you enjoyed the chat between Icarus and the immortal, did it work? Do any of my people act out of character?

We're less than 2 years away from canon, we're starting to approach a more familiar background, but I assure you, that unless Fate drags its feet, I'm turning everything on its ear.

## Chapter 17: Choice & Bargain

*It was a short man, or something reminiscent of one, who stood hidden by a light brown cloak, his twin visages each facing in the opposite direction while he eyed us with the corner of his eye.*

*"Hello, younglings," spoke one face, covering with a smile the annoyed rumbling of his counterpart: "I am Janus, and I have a choice to offer."*

### Choice & Bargain

And as he spoke, something in the world *changed*, and I found myself staring at both faces at the same time, as if the reality had been twisted by a capricious god, and from what I knew, it was exactly like that. The motes of dust suspended in the air and the glint given off by our weapons seemed to *still*, and I was left staring at the Bifront God, who was smiling widely with both of his faces.

"You should take care of your name better, **Icarus**." and as my name left the lips of both his faces, I felt like I was a bell struck with an iron rod, and I fell to my knees as I felt my *everything* vibrate. My sight seemed to expand outside of me, as if I was looking at

myself from the roof of the chamber in which we met the Bifront God, only to slam back into myself when I felt my breath return into my lungs with a shudder.

I remained still for a few seconds, trying to actually make sense of what had just happened, only to receive my answer from the too smug God in front of me: "You're not the first to build his own name, Herakles and Alexander were the same, but they didn't risk falling under their own weight."

"...What?" I stumbled to my feet, my hand grasping my brand new weapon so that I could use it as a makeshift crutch in order to rise from the unforgiving ground.

"There is power in names, you know that much. Dionysus warned you, didn't he?" his dissonant couple of voices taunted me as I tried to regain my cool. Never before I had met an immortal that stated so clearly the distance between us. There was no bargaining, no trickery, no quest-completing: I almost felt like I was holding the sky once again, only that this time the fatigue and risk was all mental, there was nothing in the physical realm that I could trace back to my... hopelessness in front of Janus.

I gulped, trying to find my words while my eyes briefly flashed across the chamber trying to figure out a solution to my problem, and it was then that I saw Abigail and Charles rest easily at both my sides, their eyes staring unfocused in the distance while their bodies twitched randomly, as if in a dream.

"The choice is yours, since you're leading them, and I have no interest in talking with them... for now." the dissonant voices of Janus forced my attention back onto him.

"Why are you here?" I asked after a deep breath.

One faced laughed roughly while the other whistled innocently, only for them to switch roles when Janus twirled in place, and even as his back was towards me, the biface head remained impossibly trailed towards me: "I offer a choice like I always do." answered the face on the left; while the one on the right chuckled humorlessly: "Mortals aren't meant to have Powerful Names, of the two I have named, the first ascended, and the second unravelled under the weight of his own shadow."

Herakles was perhaps the most famous example of a demigod ascending to godhood, the other... there was only one Alexander that came to mind: "Alexander the Great you mean?"

"He was positively bursting at the seams by the time he founded a city in honour of his deceased horse!" one face singsonged while the other seemed to weep in grief.

"I don't understand." the admission was stolen from my lips before I could control it, and the knowing grin on my interlocutor's left face, accompanied by the slow nodding of his other head told me that

"You think we're talking with words, little mortal?" Janus' left head taunted me while his left suddenly reprimanded his counterpart: "You can't explain democracy to a neutron star, an ant doesn't understand the tides."

"...What?" I was getting extremely annoyed at my inability of taking charge of the conversation, I had never been so much on the back foot before. Janus made a minor appearance only once in the books, and sure as Hades he wasn't the scary fucker he was being now. *But then again, Atlas was different too, wasn't he?*

"I offer you the same I offered to another: I can take away your name, you'll be free to start fresh." his left face seriously offered, while his right sing-songed: "You remember the last child of Atlas, don't you?"

My eyes snapped to the latter face, and immediately I was reminded of Atals' comment on Zoe Nightshade: she had fosaken her name. *Is this what he meant?*

"I can End your name." the face on the left spoke in a kind tone while the one on the right leered maliciously at me: "Don't accept, I want to see you pop under the strain."

My mind seemed to grasp what I was being told for an instant, only for the concept to slip through my hands like water. *Dionysus told me my name had changed...*

*If I'm getting this right, the whole 'Names have Power' thing boils down to the identity tied to the name being able to feel when it's invoked. Or something like that. I thought furiously. But a Name weights upon a mortal differently than it does upon an immortal, and Janus said I was 'building' my name*

"Can any immortal just... say my name like you did?" I asked fearfully as soon as I managed to focus on the conundrum I had in front of me.

An amused eyebrow rose on the right face, which mumbled something too low for me to hear while the left sighed in disappointment: "You can name Atlas, but understanding isn't quite enough to exercise power, not on someone like him at least."

"How do I build my name?" I asked tentatively, already knowing that I was either going to receive a confirmation to my suspicions or being dismissed for my far too large curiosity. And while I waited for an answer, my mind focused on his previous statement 'Do you think we're talking with words, little mortal?' *What else should we be talking with?*

"Shall I End your budding Name or not?" asked the face on the left while the one on the right seemed to distract itself with the mosaic on the ceiling of the chamber, but I could hear it mutter more to himself than to me: "He needs balance, a single trait will shred him..." then he looked at me from the corner of his eye, and I was suddenly once again *aware*, I felt like exposed nerves, like a sword made of glass, ready to shatter.

I understood what he offered: could I abandon my '**I am free**', my self imposed first commandment? But no, it wasn't imposed, it was earned, something that I had made use of on several occasions in order to remain alive. And just like that, if I were to accept Janus' offer to End my name, I could simply... *I don't know, retire?* Now that the Bifront God pointed it out, I felt somewhat tired, but it had been almost 2 years since we set sail in order to find the damned Golden Fleece, and it had been an endless stream of travelling while being on guard broken only by deadly situations and the occasional smatter of orgiastic relief, without which I sincerely doubted that the Adamas would have lasted that much.

"No." the answer to Janus' offer rose spontaneously to my lips, I kind of understood what the choice entailed: Zoe stopped being a daughter of Atlas when she forsook her name, abandoning her whole life in order to join Artemis' Hunt. Not only I didn't feel like I was bursting at the seams but the 'a single trait will shred him' was a too blatant hint to ignore. In the same way, **Atlas** was more than simple 'endless determination' I too needed to figure out a way to add another block to my 'identity', lest I ended up like Alexander, who, if I were to listen to Janus, died because his Name outgrew his mortal shell.

*Nobody names their children Herakles, but there are endless Alexander across the world, is it related?* I distractedly asked myself while I continued to talk with the Bifront God: "Thank you for the offer, though."

"And now you owe me an Offer of Free Choice." chortled the left face of Janus, while his right one made shushing motions that his counterpart couldn't see, "But you'd better learn your lesson, **Icarus**, it won't do for you to once more fly too high, hm?"

"Well, we're done here aren't we?" the other head sighed when it was clear that I was secure in my decision.

"You already know the solution to my next trick." Janus' right face smiled widely with one face while the other growled menacingly: "So we'll just repeat the same old song, for the benefit of your companions if nothing else."

And only then, the impossible twist in the world that had forced my companions into believing that we were still travelling came undone, like a knot unravelling when you pulled the right string.

The alarmed cries of Abigail and Charles immediately quieted when Janus' faces stared them down: "He always tells the truth." started one face, only to swap with the other that went ahead with a suddenly anguished cry: "He always lies, don't listen to him!"

"One door leads to your deaths." Janus twirled once more on himself, but this time his head followed the movement of the rest of his body, "The other to the next part of your journey." completed one of the two faces as he twirled madly, "But I will open only one of the doors, and I offer you a single question to discern which road is safe crossing."



Abigail's face scrunched in confusion while her eyes abandoned Janus' form in order to land on the door on the left, which sported a relief of a tree spamming nine apples of the dimensions of boars, while Charles frowned in distaste at the leather-covered door on the right. "I've got this." I immediately reassured them as I took a step forward, my mind still reeling with the weight of the revelations that Janus had just thrown on me.

"If I asked him which door was the safe one," I started while facing the face on the left as I pointed at the face on the right: "Which door would he tell me to cross?"

With quiet twin smiles the face on the left pointed at the door on my right, and I grinned in return, pointing at the door on my left: "I choose that one."

With a nod, the door I choose popped open, and Janus vanished in thin air.

"That was... smart." Abigail blinked the uneasiness out of her eyes as she followed me.

"If you asked the truth-face, he would tell you that the liar-face would point to the door that leads to death. If you asked the liar-face, it would tell you that the truth-face would point to the door that leads to death. Therefore, no matter who you asked, he would have told you which door leads to death, and therefore you picked the other door." Charles nodded approvingly as he scratched the base of his horns, following me through the door I had chosen.

*For the time being, the Labyrinth isn't proving that much of a challenge, is it?* I wondered to myself while I consciously kept myself from uttering said thought out loud: there was trying to be free, and openly challenging Fate, and a bit of caution never harmed anyone.

"We'll need to set camp soon, we walked for almost two days straight." Abigail pointed out after a while, only to receive an incredulous snort from Charles.

"What are you talking about? We met the Bifront God less than an hour ago, and we entered the Labyrinth barely a minute before that."

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, cursing myself silently for having forgotten that the Labyrinth messed up whatever perception one had of the surroundings, time included. *How long did I spend talking with Janus?* I quietly asked myself as I felt a headache stomping madly across my brain. It was going to be a long quest, that was for sure.

For lack of a better term, time seemed to either blur or crawl to a standstill since the meeting with Janus. We walked across areas that looked like your standard sewers, to actual stretches of green, lush grass that thrived despite the lack of light, to corridors that seemed made of glass. We crossed rivers, woods and climbed walls that stretched indefinitely towards a ceiling that we couldn't see. We walked in the pitch dark broken only by the torches we brought with us, we shielded our eyes from blinding light that

shone uncaringly from the very walls, we braved stretches of desert, faced a veritable snowstorm in which we killed what I suspected were Hyperboreans, and finally, and just as our rations started running thin, we met the first exit from the Labyrinth since we first entered it.

We stopped in a room full of waterfalls. The floor was one big pit, ringed by a slippery stone walkway. Around us, on all four walls, water tumbled from huge pipes. The water spilled down into the pit, and even as I cautiously shone a light down the pit, the bottom remained hidden from my sight: "Okay, let's not fall in the bottomless pit."

And as I spoke, my eyes widened, because I had just realized how *apt* my description was.

when I shined a light, I couldn't see the bottom.

Charles slumped tiredly against the wall, scooping up some water with his hands in order to rinse his face: "This pit goes straight to Tartarus, I agree with your proposition." he chuckled, making me take a cautious step back.

"I cannot shine light here," Abigail casually replied, "The Sun doesn't shine here."

Even while I stood away from the creepy hole in the ground that led to what basically counted as super-hell in greek mythology, I tried to take a deep breath and simply *feel*, like I had done once in the relative safety of the Atlantic Ocean just beyond the Camp's protections' reach, and... nothing. While I could tell that there was water running around me, that awareness disappeared just as the water left the range of the light we tried to shine towards the pit.

"Is it common?" I asked, immediately clarifying when Charles's gaze questioned me: "To find a hole in the ground that directly leads to Tartarus I mean."

"I've seen a lot of strange stuff since I first obtained my license as a Seeker," he answered shaking his head, "this *weight* cannot be an illusion, Icarus, it cannot be counterfeited, cannot be denied, if it grasps you, you're gone, we'd better get going.

I nodded thoughtfully at his answer and led my unnerved companions towards the opening in the wall, hoping that it wouldn't lead us into a place worse than the one we just left. Looking briefly at Charles' face, I wondered if he was thinking of Pan. *We'll find him*. I silently promised both to my companions and to myself, the memory of Artemis casually threatening me crystal clear in my mind.

We walked through the opening that should have lead us outside only to find ourselves walking down a corridor made of huge marble blocks. It looked like it could've been part of a Greek tomb, with bronze, torch holders fastened to the walls. It had to be an older part of the maze, but we were extremely aware that no appearance could be a

trustworthy guide, and so we kept walking until we met yet another promising exit: this time, it revealed itself to be genuine, and not yet another trick.

After ducking into a tunnel, we saw light up ahead, and we finally walked once more under the clear sky, and I blinked repeatedly until I actually managed to get used to the change in atmosphere. I was staring at daylight streaming through a set of bars above my head. We were under a steel grate made out of metal pipes. I could see trees and blue, cloudless sky.

"Where are we?" I wondered, my mind grasping desperately at whatever whisper of still useful metaknowledge I still had.

Then a shadow fell across the grate and a cow stared down at me. And were I less experienced, I would have dismissed it as another clever illusion of the cursed place we were braving, and yet, the cow was cherry red. That, coupled with the relieved sigh that escaped Abigail's lips, confirmed that the cherry red cow was actually one of the beasts from the herd sacred to her father.

Once we managed to climb to our feet, we realized that we were on a ranch of sorts. Rolling hills stretched to the horizon, dotted with oak trees and cactuses and boulders. A barbed-wire fence ran from the gate in either direction. Cherry-coloured cows roamed around, grazing on clumps of grass.

"Red cattle," Abigail smiled as her hand brushed over the nearest one, "The cattle of the Sun."

I took off my helm in order to avoid being cooked alive inside it, since like he always did each time he spotted me under his chariot, I felt the sun rays grow hotter over my form. *Annoying cunt*. I grimaced as I remembered hitting his stupid Oracle.

I was about to give a smartass' reply when I hear a low 'huff', and as I whirled on myself, I pointed my weapon towards a giant-ass dog with two heads. It looked like a greyhound, long and snaky and sleek brown, but its neck V'd into two heads, both of them snapping and snarling and generally not very glad to see us.

Before Charles could try his Satyr's 'let's-talk-to-the-animals-like-I'm-a-Disney-princess-thing', its master lumbered out of the woods, and I realized the dog was the least of our problems. The god, because I could tell he sure as hell wasn't mortal, was a huge guy with stark white hair, a straw cowboy hat, and a braided white beard.

I blinked repeatedly, his image shifting between the classical Texan Cowboy with jeans and a denim jacket over a white T-shirt and an incredibly muscled greek in a chiton, his bare feet caressing the grass under his feet without leaving a single bent blade of grass.

He held an impressive wooden club with six-inch spikes bristling on its end. And there was where I chose to focus my attention, since it seemed like the only piece of him not

continuously shifting between what I assumed was his first form and his present American adaptation.

"Heel, Orthus," he told the dog, making him growl at us once more, just to make his feelings clear, before looking us up and down, keeping his club ready.

"What've we got here?" he asked. "Cattle rustlers?"

"Just travellers," I replied calmly, "do you sell *tamed* carnivore horses? They'd do well as war-steeds."

"We do," the man's eye twitched as he tilted his head, briefly eyeing the way the Sun angrily shone on me, "Half-bloods, eh? I'm Eurytion, the cowherd for this here ranch. Son of Ares. You came through the Labyrinth like many before you, trying to steal the cattle, I reckon."

I tilted my head: "We really don't steal from people capable of smithing us in the blink of an eye." I reassured him while I eyed his spiked club, being absolutely aware of the fact that we were ridiculously, hopelessly outmatched. There was no tricking him like I did Circe, no understanding him like I did Atlas, and only a small hope of offering an exchange as I did with Prometheus.

"We get a load of visitors from the Labyrinth," Eurytion said darkly. "Not many ever leave."

"We're here to purchase, not to steal." I casually replied, aware that we were *loaded*. Between our raid on Circe's island and the Laestrygonian War, we had a wide set of magically crafted tapestries and whatnot, that coupled with loads of golden drachmas should allow us to avoid casual dismemberment at the hands of a bored ascended demigod.

Eurytion grunted: "I've got to take you to the boss, I'm not the one that takes care of the business here."

I didn't feel like we were hostages or anything. Eurytion walked alongside us with his club across his shoulder. Orthus, the two-headed dog of the size of a minivan growled a lot and sniffed at Charles's legs and shot into the bushes once in a while to chase animals, but Eurytion kept him more or less under control.

We walked down a dirt path that seemed to go on forever. Heat shimmered off the ground. Insects buzzed in the trees. Before we'd gone very far, I was sweating like crazy, feeling my celestial bronze armour heating under the unmerciful glare of the sun. Flies swarmed us. Every so often we'd see a pen full of red cows or even stranger animals. Once we passed a corral where the fence was coated in asbestos. Inside, a herd of fire-breathing horses milled around. The hay in their feeding trough was on fire. The ground smoked around their feet, but the horses seemed tame enough. One big stallion looked at

me and whinnied, columns of red flame billowing out his nostrils. I wondered if it hurt his sinuses.

"What are they for?" I asked.

Eurytion scowled. "We raise animals for lots of clients. Apollo, Diomedes, and those who can afford the cost."

"We should be able to pay without too many problems." Abigail casually noted, receiving a confirming nod from me.

"That was not what I meant." the god grumbled by himself.

Finally, we came out of the woods. Perched on a hill above us was a big ranch house, made of white stone, wood and big windows. Without another word, and with thinning stamina because of the unforgiving sun, we hiked up the hill.

"Don't break the rules:" Eurytion warned as we walked up the steps to the front porch, "No fighting. No drawing weapons. And don't make any comments about the boss's appearance."

"Why?" Charles asked before I could think of warning my companions about what we were going to witness: "What does he look like?"

Before Eurytion could reply, a new voice said, "Welcome to the Triple G Ranch."

The man on the porch had a normal head, which was a relief. His face was weathered and brown from years in the sun. He had slick black hair and a black pencil moustache. He smiled warmly at us, but the glint of his eyes spoke of another story.

He stood on a single pair of legs with three torsos spaming from his waist. His neck connected to the middle chest like normal, but he had two more chests, one to either side, connected at the shoulders, with a few inches between. For each armpit, there were two opposing arms jointed at the shoulder, making his three chests all connected into one enormous torso, with two regular but very beefy legs.

"They say they want to buy, Geryon."

"Mmmh? Do they?" he leered briefly at Abigail, whose hand immediately shot to her knife.

"We do." I stepped between the two in order to avoid a pointless confrontation. It was the first time we were in a situation where the adaptation towards U.S.A. mentality weighed heavier than the myth that had birthed the immortals around us. Up until now, each of my meetings with the Myth had been more closely related to the ancient legends that first described them, but here evidently it wasn't true, if only because Geryon wore three flannel shirts of different colours. *How do we stay alive?* I asked myself.

"Do you have a catalogue?" I spoke calmly, my thoughts returning to our recently conquered island: there were some sheep there, accompanied by random animals in the jungle-like environment, but the occasion of setting up a proper high-quality herd wasn't something I was going to miss out of fear because of hazy metaknowledge that could no longer hold true.

When all six of Geryon's eyes focused on me, following the same reality-bending mechanism that had allowed Ladon's hundred heads to attack from the same position and Janus' faces to stare at me directly, I started improvising: "Also, if in your services is present a set of instructions to set up a separate herd, we can discuss breeding lines and see what we can come up with. Besides horses for our three, that I'd buy more as a test run than anything definite, I was curious about any goat breeds."

"I make it my business to keep informed, demigod. Everybody pops into the ranch from time to time. Everyone needs something from ole Geryon." his three faces smiled, "So I'm guessing that the Laestrygonians are actually gone? And that goats would be the most adapt herd you have in mind for your newly conquered land?"

I shrugged as an answer: "It's annoying that everyone seems to always now what we're up to even when we go through the trouble to go incommunicado for long periods of time."

A booming laugh left the three chests of the man: "Ah! Nature spirits are such gossips, my friend! You're quite lucky, if it were anyone else, I would have fed you to my horses! They so love demigod flesh."

A tension that I hadn't truly admitted I was feeling lift briefly from my shoulders: "The Laestrygonians were cunts." I replied with a faint smile.

"Ah! That they were!" Geryon nodded at me while my companions remained on high alert, understandably freaked out by my casual bullshittery, "They never traded with me, worse, they tended to eat those that could buy some of my horses!"

"So, about that catalogue?" I asked tentatively, the more I thought about my improvised request, the more I felt it was a good idea. I was more a foot soldier than an exceptional rider, but given the form of my newly forged weapon, I couldn't really ignore the reach advantage.

"I don't write down that stuff, it's asking for trouble, I tell 'ya, the first thief to know my herds would have a mighty easier time in figuring out a way to steal them, leave here your companions, Eurytion will make sure they're comfortable. I want to give you a tour of the ranch."

Geryon had a pick up ready just beyond the porch, it was painted in white and black, mimicking a cow's hide, and had a couple of giant horn protruding from the front.

"We have a huge operation!" Geryon boasted as the moo-mobile lurched forward, "Horses and cattle mostly, but all sorts of exotic varieties, too."

We came over a hill, and I started the confusing balancing act of praising his cattle without sounding too impressed: "Hippalektryons? I thought them extinct."

At the bottom of the hill was a fenced-in pasture with a dozen or so of very strange animals. Each had the front half of a horse and the back half of a rooster. Their rear feet were huge yellow claws. They had feathery tails and red wings. As I watched, two of them got in a fight over a pile of seed. They reared up on their wings at each other until the smaller one galloped away, its rear bird legs putting a little hop in its step.

"I imagine they lay eggs?"

"Once a year!" Geryon grinned in the rearview mirror. "Very much in demand for omelettes!"

Were I a satyr, I would have probably objected at the thinning of an endangered species, however, I was more or less in business mode, and I simply recognized what Geryon was doing: "Keeping the numbers low in order to control the market?" a triple grin was the only answer I received.

"Now, over here," he said, "we have our fire-breathing horses, which you may have seen on your way in. They're bred for war, naturally."

"I've seen that they basically scorch the ground they run upon, don't they burn their rider?" I asked.

Geryon grinned slyly: "Not if you use our saddles, my friend, of course, the ones that don't get burned within a year cost a little bit extra, we use the hide of Apollo's Holy Cattle for those."

Sure enough, hundreds of the cherry-coloured cattle were grazing the side of the hill we were coasting. "Yes, well, Apollo is too busy to see them," Geryon explained, "so he subcontracts to us. We breed them vigorously because there's such a demand."

"For what?" I asked.

Geryon raised an eyebrow. "Meat, of course! Everyone has to eat, and those who can afford it recognize high-quality food when I present it."

"I somewhat remember that a lot of shit went down when someone ate the Sun's Holy Cattle, I'm guessing that he doesn't exactly know what you do with them?"

"Yes, and if Apollo cared, I'm sure he would tell us." Geryon nodded towards me, his eyes shrewdly waiting for my reaction.

I simply shrugged: "I punched his Oracle once, if you can tweak his nose, I'll cheer from the sidelines."

"Ah! I knew that there was a reason I liked you so! Look over here: some of my exotic game."

The next field was ringed in barbed wire, and the whole area was crawling with giant scorpions. "What kind of market is there for giant scorpions?"

"Ah, well, a Trader doesn't Tattle!" he laughed boisterously, "Here at the Triple G ranch we respect our patrons' privacy! Of course, to be kept off the books requires..."

"Let me guess," I smirked at the unholy three-torsoed man: "It costs a bit extra?"

Another too loud laugh signalled that I pretty much understood the man's reasoning. And I found myself unable to actually disliking him on the account of my metaknowledge.

"Now, over here are my prize stables! Those you must see!"

I didn't need to see them, because as soon as we got within a hundred meters I started to smell them. Near the banks of a green river was a horse corral the size of a football field. Stables lined one side of it. About a hundred horses were milling around in the mixture of mud and horse-shit that reached just above their hooves.

"Well, you don't keep them very well, do you?" I sneered at the sight. I got it that Herakles had to pile a metric ton of horse-shit for one of his labours, but it had been more than 2000 years before, since then, he surely could have built another horse corral in which he could shift this herd while he cleaned the other one? The horses were really gross from wading through their own shit, and the stables were just as bad.

"My stables!" Geryon said. "Well, actually they belong to Aegas, but we watch over them for a small monthly fee. Aren't they lovely?"

"The flesh-eating ones?" I asked getting a nod in return, "You don't sell many of them, do you?"

"All right, perhaps the stables are a bit challenging to clean. Perhaps they do make me nauseous when the wind blows the wrong way. But so what? My clients still pay me well."

"What clients?" I curiously asked, I didn't want to find myself facing a charge of flesh-eating horses.

"Oh, you'd be surprised how many people will pay for a flesh-eating horse. They make great garbage disposals. A wonderful way to terrify your enemies. Great at birthday parties! We rent them out all the time."



Slowly, he stopped the pick-up and he climbed out, before strolling toward the stables as if enjoying the fresh air. It would've been a nice view, with the river and the trees and hills and all, except for the quagmire of horse muck.

"So!" the man clapped after a few minutes spent looking over the horses: "We do have a delivery service, obviously, but I'm guessing that you'd prefer to talk business with your friends present too, wouldn't you? I do so love haggling!"

"To bring here payment, I'll need my people to send stuff over with Hermes' Express, and since you're the one capable of smithing me and mine here, I'll pay everything *after* the animals I choose are at their destination." I started out before we actually got started with the haggling part of our bargain, "And I'll need an oath on the Styx to keep up your part of the agreement, since you're the only one not risking consequences."

"We'll need to word the agreement carefully, but it seems fair."

*I wonder if he can crossbreed rabbits and goats? If I want a herd of carnivore horses on the island, I'll need a herd to feed them with.* To be entirely truthful, I was somewhat surprised by Geryon's genial attitude towards those with enough money to pay for cattle he wasn't authorized to sell.

## **AN PART 1**

**I've largely explored the building of a name here, I hope I managed to convey how it works without having the MC understand it perfectly.**

**To be honest, the Janus conversation felt like I was juggling the mechanics of the name, the understanding of the MC, and the words that Janus used.**

**How did the exchange feel? I wanted to keep it somewhat dynamic, but there really isn't a way to do so in a pacific setting like this one.**

## **AN PART 2**

**Janus, as I've hopefully managed to convey, is extremely difficult to place in the story. For starters, even if Riordan uses it in the first book series (in the battle of the labyrinth) he's an entirely Roman deity, and so I was stumped about placing him in this chapter or not.**

**Janus is the god of Beginnings and Ends, of Periods of Transition, traditionally depicted with a face looking at the past and one looking at the future, he was present at the beginning of the world, when the primordials found their way out of**

**Chaos. Above any other god, he represents change and choice, or better yet, the beginning of anything and the end of everything.**

**The only relevant myth I've found about him, it's about the kidnapping of the Sabines, which he saved by burying the kidnappers under an avalanche of boiling water and volcanic ashes.**

**Besides that, he's a very passive deity, the equivalent of a detached observer. I've no idea why Riordan used him, but I've found a use for him too.**

**And on all the well-wishers for Hestia as a patron, I feel like pointing out that Icarus isn't really a Hero, not really. He does shit because he can/wants to. He's no defender of the hopeless, no saviour of innocents. Thalia is one of his two friends, so he set up the whole Adamas Thing in order to retrieve the Golden Fleece without the Gods' approval, which is one of the reasons why the whole thing is taking so damn long.**

**So... try to think what kind of place Icarus would like to build. He kind of despises that older demigods are tossed to the curb (either that or there is a 100% death rate in Camp after a demigod hits 20 years of age), but he doesn't exactly care about them, he rolled up people thirsty for freedom, for *doing something* with their divinity, not a bunch of firemen willing to save kittens from trees.**

**With that in mind, I don't really feel like Hestia is the more fitting choice.**

### **AN PART 3**

**Geryon is actually described with having 3 of everything but a single pair of legs, in fact, when he faced Herakles, he wielded 3 shields, three spears, and wore 3 helms. I'm bypassing the 3 helms thing because in mythology he was killed by a single arrow in his cranium, but I have to do a mesh-up between Riordan and Greek Mythos, here, it shouldn't harm the narration.**

**In any case, the only reason he is treated as a villain in Riordan's book is that he had a standing agreement with Kronos and he's a greedy bastard, such is not the case now.**

**I'm casually reminding you that this crew's roaming started on the 17th of September of 2000, we're now in July of 2002, so almost 2 years. Besides Poseidon's opposition (he doesn't want Thalia to be resurrected, so he can be an asshole), Hera is certainly against Icarus (he cursed him along with Thalia and Luke after their escapade in her garden), Apollo hates him because he struck his Oracle, while on the other hand we have Dionysus who is somewhat passively helping them remain**

sane, Ares who enjoyed greatly their storming of Circe's island, and maybe Zeus that occasionally sends good winds.

There is a lot of politics behind the delay of a mission that Percy Jackson took a random week to complete, and I'm largely playing it off as the natural randomness of a metaphysical realm when it's not curbed by the presence of a Prophecy.

## Chapter 18: Observational Interlude

### Observational Interlude

#### Charles

Charles was seated on a stretch of the palisade, looking over Icarus' taming attempt. The satyr had offered to accompany him since the ability to speak with horses might have come in handy, but since the first diplomatic attempt, during which the carnivore horse had attempted to *eat* the Seeker of Pan, both he and Icarus had deemed words to be a rather poor substitute of a sound beating down. After all, being a flesh-eating horse meant that the mare would react better to a display of dominance rather than one of companionship.

So the satyr went from helper to helpless and amused witness of Icarus repeatedly punching the flesh-eating mare, hoping that she would eventually grow tired and realize that Icarus, for all of his two-legged weakness, had faced off bigger and worse things than an enraged horse.

"Why did you insist with this one, by the way?" Charles asked as the demigod spun out of the way of yet another enraged charge from the horse.

"Females are vicious."

That made the satyr snort in agreement: of all the things he had ever witnessed in his whole life, Icarus was among the most peculiar, there was no doubt of that.

Besides the rather appalling way through which Geryon took care of the Triple G ranch, over which Charles had to force himself to not poke his nose into, he was still rather surprised by Icarus' bargaining skills. He had managed to turn what was undoubtedly a powder keg into a quiet and calm transaction that favoured the most recent conquest of the Laestrygonian's island. *Who else would have thought of shipping away from here the mountains of manure as part of the payment?* The satyr shook his head while he went over the terms of the contract Geryon was busy writing down.

The island would need fertilizer in order to turn the terraces into something cultivable, and selected breeds of this or that species could be used to turn the jungle and a rather primitive environment into some sort of rural settlement. A part of Charles wept at the

idea of the wild jungle on the island being turned into a tamed version of itself, but he couldn't fault the unique demigod. *At least the settlement will be with 0 environmental impacts.* He reassured himself, before sighing and turning his thoughts towards his current problem.

Charles had been a seeker for 15 years, fifteen years of following his nose, of occasionally helping this or that demigod. Fifteen years of 'fuck you' to any monster that tried to stop him from his search. And in fifteen years, the only thing he had to show for it was a slowly growing collection of scars. Many of his brethren, Seekers and regular hopefuls alike, risked and asked around in the whole extension of the Western Civilization, but that was the problem, was it not?

How could Pan be waiting anywhere near civilization? How did that make any kind of sense? So, while his fellow Seekers tended to gravitate towards natural reservations and demigods, hoping that one of them would naturally stumble upon a Quest for Pan, Charles had pushed himself further than anyone, on paths that rarely met human feet.

He went from the frozen tundra to the Mexican desert, to the tall highways of goats in the Land of Fire to the deep Rainforests. And while the Wild's presence had sometimes shuddered in approval of his music, and animals tanked him for his help, there never was a sign of Pan. Nothing, not a peep.

"I'll support you, whatever you decide," Icarus panted after another sharp twist to avoid getting trampled by the admittedly beautiful mare he was wrestling against, "but can we actually talk plainly about it?"

The satyr sighed tiredly, eyeing the demigod in his admittedly brave and honest attempt to forge a bond with the potty-mouthed mare. For the past 15 years, he had fought against despair and the ver growing thought of surrender, only to endure and keep going, and now Icarus, admittedly the most peculiar demigod he had ever met, wanted to poke at his open wounds? Fuck no!

"There is nothing to talk about, Icarus, I am a Seeker, and Seek is what I've chosen to do." the words left his mouth as if spoken by someone else, it was a standard answer, it wasn't the first time Charles was forced to give it. A younger satyr would have snapped in annoyance at the perceived insult, but Charles was both too old, too tired, and too practical to take what passed as a genuine concern in the head of this demigod as a challenge.

"Why are you looking for Pan?" Icarus asked while dodging a deceptively fast mule kick from the mare.

Charles blinked in disbelief: "The Wild is dying... the forests..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know that part, I agree, the humans are more than 7 billion already, and we do love exploring, it is obvious that primaeval areas are becoming less and smaller, to

be treated not as Palaces that honour and thrive with Nature, but as pets in a zoo." Icarus voice cut through the baffled reply of the satyr.

Charles sat a bit straighter on the wooden palisade that trapped together demigod and flesh-eating horse, frowning as he realized, once again, that Icarus was far different from anyone he had ever met.

"The point is," Icarus continued as he somersaulted the mare only for her to graze his arm with her sharp teeth, "let's say you find Pan tomorrow, what do you expect him to do? No Greek God has risen to take his place as God of the Wild, it means that either he is so powerful that any challenge would be foolish, which is not the case since there is almost no Wild left in the world, what do you expect him to do? To sing to the forest, so that they'll move against mankind? For him to strike an alliance with Kymopoleia, the goddess of the violent storm, so that she can strike down the ships and oil rigs? For the King to scatter the aeroplanes and satellites that the humans build?"

As Icarus spoke, the carnivore mare he had been tried to tame through what amounted to a wrestling match stopped and eyed him shrewdly, while his words echoed around him, depicting a word in a constant storm and neverending death, Charles shuddered, before feeling something that he hadn't allowed himself to perceive in a long time: rage.

It was like a sheet lifted from a statue, revealing something that had always been there, nurtured by each failed attempt, by each year spent seeking without success, by each news of forests cut down: "What do you expect me to do, uh? I know that the Wild is Dying! Everybody does!" he shouted towards Icarus as he hopped within the area defined by the palisade marching forward in the seemingly limping step typical of his kind.

"I expect you to use your brain, instead of slamming your head fruitlessly against a wall!" Icarus shouted back, twisting once more now that the mare attempted to bite his shoulder and retaliating with a solid punch against her nose, which made her rear up in outrage and forced the demigod to take a step back to avoid her hooves.

The demigod whirled once more towards the satyr, changing his tone of voice, abandoning his confrontational attitude and returning to use his usual calm and controlled voice: "I don't seek to hurt you, Chars, I seek to help you."

"Help?" the satyr chuckled mirthlessly as the demigod jumped away from yet another charge from the flesh-eating mare, who had deemed the satyr to be a good distraction and thusly planning to keep him alive in order to take by surprise the demigod who was attempting to tame her.

"It's clear that the Wild cannot be retaken, or cannot be revived, by violence against mankind, since it would cause them to pop out the nuclear fire in the worst-case scenario, which is admittedly the scenario nobody wants." Icarus spoke as he eyed with mistrust the horse, "You'll need to convince Mankind, to make them wish for renewable

energies, for 0 impact buildings, for electric cars. Seduce them with the luxury market, setting up high-end restaurants that make use of only biological products, shape their own culture and use it against them."

"You've been thinking about this." Charles felt his rage go from a towering fire to a simmering ember, once again cloaked in the unyielding grey of his determination.

"I have, yeah." Icarus nodded before suddenly shooting towards the mare, who, not expecting to have the tables turned on her, found herself on the backfoot with the powerful arms of the demigod clutching around her powerful neck and his leg pushing all of his weight in a way that made her lose the support of her anterior legs.

"I thought that you needed to find Pan." the satyr asked while leisurely retreating back towards the palisade, the amusement at seeing the demigod wrestle with a carnivore war horse returning to the forefront of my mind.

"I do," Icarus replied whipping his torso sideways and clamping both of his arms around the neck of the ferocious mare, leveraging impossible strength with his bare feet digging deep into the earth, "but I only promised to keep looking, there isn't a time limit, and as long as I have a Seeker on the Adamas, it counts as me looking for the Lord of the Wild."

Charles snorted at the demigod, that had somehow managed to force the mare on one flank against the ground, and was now holding his knee at the base of her neck, looking her straight in the eye, treating the whole taming of the war-horse like he would have treated dealing with a stubborn hound. *To be truthful, it seems to be working.* The satyr noted by himself now that he stopped ignoring the potty-mouthed horse. She had continuously insulted both the demigod, the satyr himself, their parentage, and every aspect of their persons that she had been able to witness.

And yet, as he looked, Charles saw the fight bleed out of the flesh-eating horse, that now was waiting calmly under the heavy pats of Icarus, who, clad nothing but muddy linen trousers, had a wild smile on his face.

The satyr had seen many demigods grow up: from kids that barely distinguished one end of the sword from another to young adults that without exception died as soon as they left Camp. Icarus had grown into his adult frame since the first time Charles had boarded the ship that the demigod would eventually rename 'Adamas': he was now a man of average height, sitting roughly at 1,75 meters, with short, dirt blond hair that framed a face made of sharp features. His mismatched eyes were as unnerving now as they had been the first time Charles had stared into them, they even seemed to glow from time to time. Beauty came naturally with his Greek heritage, which couldn't be denied, but there were moments in which the calm equilibrium of his features turned into a threatening visage that reminded Charles of the less appealing aspects of the Greek world: the way in which he occasionally tilted his head to stare at the starry sky when he commanded the helm of the Adamas, the mad flash in his eyes when he planned his outrageous

escapades. *Seriously, the genocide of a whole race of giant man-eater with less than 20 demigods?* The satyr was still reeling from the sheer impossibility that he had witnessed.

But then again, demigods were kind of conceived to defy expectations both in the good and the bad. It was clear to everybody that he used the death of Helena as an excuse to push the whole Adamas towards genocide. The Laestrygonians had undoubtedly caused endless amounts of grief, but it wasn't for that reason that Icarus had led the Adamas against them: no, he wanted to surpass a challenge that nobody ever even thought of, and if success came with a brand new island, well, all the better.

Charles shook his head returning to the present, observing with a cautious detachment how the flesh-eating mare slowly rose from the ground, eyeing her new master with reluctant respect. While the demigod mounted the carnivore horse, the satyr's mind repeated once more the demigod's words: *No Greek God has risen to take his place as God of the Wild, it means that either he is so powerful that any challenge would be foolish, which is not the case since there is almost no Wild left in the world, what do you expect him to do?*

*What would I expect him to do?* The satyr asked himself with a tired sigh, *I... I guess that I'd wish for him to save the Wild with a snap of his fingers, but if he could, he would have done so already. Maybe I should defend the Wild on my own terms.*

While Icarus directed the newly tamed mare in a circle, testing how she answered to the pressure of his knees, Charles felt his spine straighten and his shoulders abandon the weight of his quest for Pan, taking in exchange the weight of his own ambition, something just as mad and overachieving as Icarus' conquest of the Laestrygonians had been.

*I'll save the Wild myself.* The satyr found himself smiling, feeling his own determination fill his veins.

## **Luke**

Camp Half-Blood, very much like its multiple patrons, never changed. There were twelve cabins for the demigods of the twelve Olympians, an Arena, stables for both normal and winged horses, strawberries fields, the Great House, where spoils of quests were kept and the Oracle awaited to be asked a prophecy, there was a large forest where Capture the Flag took place during the day and *something* freely roamed in the night, there was an Archery Range, and the obstacle course that sported actual lava in a part of it.

The camp had always been the same, from what Luke understood, it was first developed with the spreading of canonized education that took place not long after the Industrial Revolution, and it had remained the same since its location had been placed in doubt during World War II. In case of Hitler's victory (learning that he was a child of Hades

hadn't been an actual shock), the Heart of the West would have found itself into Germany, Olympus would have rested tall in the heart of the Third Reich, and probably Luke wouldn't be born.

The thought of never being born didn't feel the son of Hermes with dread. Apparently, the gods didn't manage to scatter their bastards outside the influence of the West, and not for a lack of trying, Luke suspected, but that was neither here nor there, playing what-ifs wasn't a game that ever gave him something different than grief and anguish.

*What if I hadn't asked for a Quest? What if I didn't bring Thalia? What if I had brought Icarus with us? What if, What if, What if...* The son of Hermes thought bitterly as he walked among the quiet woods.

It had been years. *Years.* He spent years with Thalia, keeping each other safe, and more than a year in the company of Icarus, whose outrageous attitude and ideas had gifted his merry group with many happy and outlandish memories. Memories that he turned into ash because of... what? Recognition?

*At least Hermes went out of his way to recognize me.* He laughed bitterly to himself, *but what about all the others? I had my chance, regardless of how I went about it or what consequences it brought.* Luke remembered the stares since then. Luke remembered that Icarus hadn't needed a parent to recognize him in order to be happy, that Thalia sure as Hades would have wished for nothing more than being left alone by her father and the expectations it brought. *He didn't even think of an original quest for me...*

It was... unjust. Downright cruel. Oh sure, some children managed well enough with their mortal parent. Money is a virtue on its own, and being a problematic brat with Dyslexia and ADHD didn't matter that much when you were primed to become a great athlete in this or that sport. If your godly parent was weak enough, your smell would even fade eventually, to the point in which there would be no difference between you and a mortal. But how many demigod children managed to survive that long? By the time they were 13 years old, either they made it to the Camp, or they were eaten by monsters.

Why in Hades would you have a child if you weren't going to take care of him? What was the whole point? Disgusting, the lot of them. Even when they were virgin goddesses they couldn't avoid siring semidivine children here and there, Annabeth was proof enough of that. Luke had found her when she had barely learned how to read, and that was more because of her intelligence than any actual love from her family, either the mortal or immortal branch.

Luke gritted his teeth as his sword hacked relentlessly at a tree that luckily didn't have a dryad ready to tear into him. What was the whole fucking point of being a Half-Blood? Be the errand boy of uncaring parents? What was the point in being taught myths, horsemanship, martial skills, when they couldn't be applied anywhere reasonably in the actual world?



Even if a demigod managed to reach a reasonable age, and find employment outside of Camp, how long before said Half-Blood was forced to leave during their shift in order to take care of a monster? There was such a talk of being a Hero in Camp, but what was the point in saving others when you didn't even manage to have a life yourself? And yeah, it sucked when this or that monster ate a mortal, the gods knew that even a normal human had his problems without dragging into it immortal monsters from myth, but people fucking *died* every day.

Everything felt just so... pointless, and the fault, despite whatever disagreement he may or may not have with Icarus, was squarely placed at Olympus' feet. What was even the point of quests? Recognition and honour in case of success? Why? Why would children risk their lives in order to gain a single appreciative nod from the only parent that was actually able to stay by their side?

Immortals of any kind, and even the demigods, were simply too great a threat towards their mortal parent. How long could a demigod, even one trained at Camp, defend their mortal friends? Their frail, easily tricked friends? Friends that the Mist turned in people that saw one of their friends kill both strange animals and other people in the name of what? A forgotten pantheon.

Luke felt so... *helpless*. He knew that there was nothing that he could do. But even his furious impotent rage was better of the uncaring acceptance of Icarus. Icarus, who kept doing what the fuck he wanted on the basis that he couldn't be bothered by taking anything seriously.

Icarus appeared like he just... kept going, just... stopping stopped thinking about Thalia, like she never fucking existed, and setting up his own outrageous adventure. He had been gone for almost two years. Two years in which Luke had tried to climb out of the pit of guilt and self-loathing he had spiralled into, working his ass off every day and every night, recovering demigods, teaching demigods, guiding them in their first, admittedly scary, days, defending the borders of Camp when the magic of the borders wavered, and whatnot.

Playing capture the flag like it was remotely useful. Running along with dryads that would never have to run for their lives from monsters ready to eat them alive, learning how to ride horses that would not be available when they were actually needed.

And now there was talking of Icarus slaying the Hydra, storming Circe's island, and conquering another. It seemed that the Fates had decided to make a joke out of Luke's life. He asked once for a quest: it ended in disaster. The blonde fucker that repeatedly broke the Camp' rules got first blessed by Dionysus, and then sailed off in a death trap, turning it into a succession of successes that was utterly unbelievable.

The worst part? Luke was sure that Icarus hadn't spared a single thought about the campers since then, and already he was being spoken of in tones usually reserved for Herakles or the Ancient Heroes.

With a grimace and a furious glint in his eyes, the son of Hermes returned to hack furiously at the tree in front of him.

## **David**

*12 September 2002*

The hammer fell constantly and heavily on the anvil, shaping the length of iron along with David's wishes. There was an understanding that came with the process of forging that not many people ever understood, even among his own brothers and sisters at Hephaestus cabin. It wasn't just about the shaping and the moulding of a purpose over the materials that were reborn in the forge, the Crafting aspect of his father was merely a consequence. What did people actually understand of Fire?

Fire was at the base of life, fire was energy, change at its more basic form. Fire was in the cells that turned oxygen into energy, chemical fire was what turned simple ATP molecules in movement, movement was the measure of life itself. Without the warmth given off the fire that burned deeply under the earth, there wouldn't be protected from the radiation given off from the sun, which would have killed every form of life on the planet.

David didn't know how the scientific truth of Fire related to the origin and development of the Greek Pantheon, and to be entirely honest, he didn't actually care: there was only the movement of the hammer, the bellowing of the forge when his foot pushed air in the earth of the flame. There was fire in the forge he had built, electrical current in the automations he had built along with his sister Sophia in order to fasten the adaptation of the Laestrygonian's island to the specifics of the people from the Adamas, there was fire in the repurposed engines of the ship that allowed for quicker treatment of materials needed to build both weapons and ordinary tools.

And there was fire into David's heart, fire that rolled off his arms and into the tools he was using to shape the metal in his own personal forge. Automations were useful, that much was obvious, machines were the true hearth of civilization of any kind, from a simple pruned branch that could be used as a spear to the great engines used to send mortals on the very moon.

And yet, there was a quality to anything realized directly with his hands that couldn't be denied: there was a purpose infused with the product of his hands that no machine would ever be able to gift to the cold metal.

"You're worried." a soft voice, heard between the thunder of his hammer and the bellow of the forge, made David look up from his work, seeking its origin. And despite the focus and almost trance-like state he had been until a second before, the son of Hephaestus found himself smiling warmly at the owner of that voice.

Hannah, daughter of Demetra, was a relatively short and somewhat plump demigoddess, with blonde hair that reminded of the wheat and dark brown eyes that spoke of rich soil. She had a large bosom and large hips, like most of her sisters, yet her mind was as sharp as they came, and something had brought her close to David during Icarus' six-month-long convalescence back on the Hydra's island.

"I am," the demigod confessed freely, knowing that Hannah was the most stalwart person he had ever met, and so deserving as much truth as the son of Hephaestus could bear uttering out loud: "the weapon I forged for Icarus... I'm not sure about it."

"How so?" Hannah led him a few steps away from the forge, and he sighed in appreciation for the kind breeze that washed away the heavy heat of the flames.

"Swords, spears, shields, automations... they're all things that I have in my head, I inherited those, I simply let my hands move and those follow the old designs." David rolled his shoulders while his eyes roamed over the slowly growing projects that eventually would turn the island into something truly extraordinary. From the budding harbour, which was still in its initial stages, to the improvised cave from where his automations were cutting stone slabs necessary for the parts of the city that had been approved by everyone.

"It's not only the merging of steel and celestial bronze, even if I admit that I love the Damascus design I managed to give the blade," the smith' eyes found the ones of Hannah, who calmly waited for him to share his burdens: "the design... it's like a naginata, but with a straight blade, I don't know what kind of stress the blade can support before breaking."

"Did you do your best?"

The calm questions shook the demigod out of his reverie, making him eye speculatively the daughter of Demetra: "Well, yes, obviously."

"Then, if you can't trust yourself, trust that Icarus was right in having faith in you," she smiled as she took a step forward: "Nobody denies that he's a bit mad, and that sometimes we're in way above our head, but it will be fun nevertheless, won't it? Besides, there was something I wanted to tell you..."

As she was about to sweetly kiss him, another familiar voice cut into their conversation: "Well hello, there!"

David turned towards the owner of the voice with a wide smile on his face: "Icarus! I thought we were keeping incommunicado!"

"We were," the image in the Iris Message shook his head: "But apparently the nature spirits are absolutely terrible gossips, so there are already voices about the Laestrygonians. By the way, how long ago did we enter the Labirynt?"

"More than a month, it's the 12th of September." Hannah quipped with a faint smile towards the Adamas' captain, earning an appreciative nod as an answer.

"Well, we stumbled over a Geryon's ranch, and I've got a list of stuff for you to send at the 'Triple G Ranch, to the care of '. Do you have a pen and paper? I kind of bargained some of Circe's useless stuff we looted along with the money."

"In exchange of what?"

"Oh, you'll see..." the wild smile on Icarus' face generated a shiver down the demigods' spines, and it was the result of an unholy combination of both expectation and a thin silver of fear.

AN

**I know that dropping the MC's POV is fucking annoying, especially now since we're so close to getting started with the rich and escalating end of the Adamas Arc (mostly based on the Odyssey), but I felt that an actual, in-story, recap of sorts was necessary, not only to remind myself of the existence of a wider world beyond the MC, but also to remind the readers that a lot of shit is going on in the background.**

**I used Charles, Luke and David in order to push the story a little forward, while showing different facets of Icarus: respected (the satyr), envied (Luke), kind-of-hero-worship (David-Hannah).**

**I'd really love to give hints to the next Arcs, but then what surprised would they be?**

**AN Commenting City Patrons:**

**Ate** is a fucking good attempt, but she doesn't have any positive connotation! For those that don't know, Ate was a greek mythological figure who induced rash and ruinous actions by both gods and men. She made Zeus—on the day he expected the Greek hero Heracles, his son by Alcmena, to be born—take an oath: the child born of his lineage that day would rule "over all those dwelling about him" (*Iliad*, Book XIX). Zeus's wife, the goddess Hera, implored her daughter Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, to delay Heracles' birth and to hasten that of another child of the lineage, Eurystheus, who would therefore become ruler of Mycenae and have Heracles as his subject. Having been deceived, Zeus cast Ate out of Olympus, after which she remained on earth, working evil and mischief. Zeus later sent to earth the Litai ("Prayers"), his old and crippled daughters, who followed Ate and repaired the harm done by her.

**Pan** doesn't really make sense, does he? As a patron for a city. Besides the fact that he's kind of dead, he's the god of the Wild, and the literal opposite of the wild is civilization, of which cities are merely an example.

**Hestia** would be a cool choice, but she really doesn't click with Icarus' way of doing things, does she? Icarus cares a lot only about his people, the rest of the demigods on Camp Half-Bloods can learn to stand up on their own two feet or die like anyone else.

**Nyx** is not a goddess, is a primordial: one of those things that would make Olympus fall on Icarus' back like a ton of bricks.

**Hephaestus** is another rather good idea, but since Icarus is without a doubt the 'king' of the new island, I'd like for the patron to be someone more in tune with his character... so I'm not sure.

**The Olympians in general would not make for a good patron, since they are somewhat directly subservient to Zeus, but maybe I can figure something out.**

## **Chapter 19: Dungeons & Other Shit**

### **Dungeons & Other Shit**

Mera walked calmly along the path of the Labyrinth, her hoofs resounding quietly on the cobbled path that suddenly turned into a stretch of sand.

"I still find hysterical that you named your horse 'Mera' because she's a mare." Abigail's mocking voice made me turn on one side to smile wildly towards her.

We left the 3G Ranch an undetermined stretch of time before, after receiving confirmation that the transaction with Geryon went well, and we had made use of the occasion to purchase a couple of horses: my carnivorous mare, which I had admittedly not wasted much time in naming, and a flaming horse for Abigail, that she had bonded with during my chat with Charles.

The satyr, both due to his goat legs and his natural aversion towards tamed animals that were bred exclusively to aid humans, kept up with a spring in his step that I was glad to see. It had taken a brief shouting match to make him realize that there was a good reason why Pan hadn't been seen for the better part of a thousand years. Gods were cunts, of that I had little doubt, but it was rare that they acted without reason at all. Besides, if nobody ever found Pan, I doubt that our little group would manage when I treated his retrieval as little more than a side-quest.

The only thing that apparently nobody ever thought about was trying to solve the issue of the Wild's death by themselves. And I could only hope that there was some measure of truth to the saying 'God helps who helps themselves.

"You called your horse Feb, short of Phoebus." I rolled my eyes while I looked her over. It was undeniable that she had a good bond with her horse which disliked following my

mare and had attempted to bite a couple of times, only to be rebuffed sharply by the daughter of Apollo.

"How did you manage to organize his food by the way?" Charles asked as he walked by my side, his nose twitching madly while he subconsciously looked for a hint of any kind.

Abigail laughed a bit while she looked over one of the arrows she had plucked from her quiver: "Feb can eat any plant if it is on fire, it's not a big issue, but admittedly once we're settled back home we'll need to either use alchemy to prepare an ointment for the ever-burning wheat or simply buy from Geryon."

I nodded at the reminder: "Once we're done with this part, we'll need to kill Geryon."

"What!?" the startling answer from Abigail was at odds with the suddenly gleeful look on Charles' face, "Why would we need to do that?"

"Because he's a greedy bastard who will figure out a way to sell us off, with the numbers about the cattle I've purchased, once could make an educated guess about our admittedly small numbers, and while this first trade was fruitful for him and necessary for us, he was already thinking about killing us and then direct the less savoury parts of Greek Myth on our asses. For example, I bet the Lycans would rather enjoy storming our island while our guard is down."

"I thought you addressed the secrecy in the contract you had him swear to uphold on the Styx."

I nodded again while my eyes scanned the everchanging scenery in front of us, my will keeping the creeping silence of the Labyrinth at bay: "I did, but I couldn't ask for him to bind to the secret his employer, could I? He cannot offer information about us, but leaving around pieces of info is pretty easy to do, and if then he gets an extra on his following transaction, then who is he to say no?"

"But how could anyone just find the island?" Abigail questioned me, "It's not like it actually has an address, we stumbled upon it from the sea, and one cannot simply *navigate* the Labirynt."

"Yeah, but we just witnessed Geryon send cattle through a missive-service that requires him nothing but a little tax to the God of Thieves." I snorted, "Once he gets enough incentive, he'll just breed a super Chimaera and drop it on our asses."

"That's paranoid." the daughter of Apollo frowned at my back while I shrugged uncaringly.

"Well... you've seen how he treats animals, he's kind of an asshole." Charles obviously sided with me, "You know, a patron is exactly the kind of thing that would solve this problem."

I grimaced at the reminder: "Yeah, yeah, I know. But I don't want to start a competition between the Olympians like they did in Athens, mostly because we would make an enemy of anyone we *didn't* choose."

"What about your mother?" Abigail proposed, "I know that my dad would sooner burn you alive than help you, but he is a possibility, like everybody else. Founding a city isn't exactly something that happens every other day, the Gods will be falling one over another in order to gain such honour."

I grimaced at the proposal, thinking over my last meeting with Hekate, who had apparently conned me out of three golden apples in exchange for a vague promise that someday, once 'another condition was met' I would earn the frankly bullshit powerset of a true-born demigod of Poseidon. Honestly, before our raid of Circe's island, I knew jack shit about magic beyond my admittedly instinctive manipulation of the Mist, and I hadn't had the time to learn properly since then.

*Magic is female.* Circe's words echoed in my head as we kept moving inside of the Labyrinth. What little I knew of necromancy, both from Medea's legend and the examples that Nico Di Angelo would one day provide, coupled with the generally ritualistic aspect involved in changing people into animals, led me to believe that magic was at its core an 'exchange' of sorts. *I won't go far without a proper teacher.* I reluctantly admitted to myself: I had an instinctive grasp of the manipulation of the Mist, due to my blood, and I could tie small illusions through small enchantments, but that was the extent of my knowledge in that field. I was much better at breaking through illusions though. If that was the result of Hekate's essence mixing with the blood of Poseidon's demigods, I didn't know.

Offers could be made for ghosts so that they could temporarily walk among the living, dragon's teeth could be imbued with the essence of war and turned into soldiers made of bone, dreams could carry one towards divining small stretches of the future... there were many examples, both of things I had personally witnessed and stuff that I had only heard about, and the only constant was that there wasn't a fixed rule that allowed someone to perform 'magic'.

"You can't trust an immortal as far as you can throw him, I'd prefer having either someone that genuinely likes us, or that owes us big. What if we agree to have a patron, and then he or she starts having expectations out of us? Or attempts to dictate what we do? The kind of people we should admit on the island? Worse, what if he starts giving out quests?" I replied to Abigail, who turned pensive, no doubt thinking over the distasteful option of Gods giving out Quests to the people of the Adamas.

*By the way, we'll need a name for ourselves. People of the Adamas is kind of a mouthful.* I made a mental note just as Charles let out a distressed bleating sound, causing both me and Abigail to focus on the Here and Now.

"I smell something." the satyr immediately spoke, making me tense my hands on the shaft of my still unnamed weapon, "Powerful, and old. Acid... no, there's two, both coming from the left."

I grimaced at the idea of facing two monsters at the same time, but while the Labirynt always offered another way, another path, and a different trail to follow, I was reminded of Prometheus words: *'The Labyrinth is more than a Living Maze of Stone Corridors, to choose right from left is easy enough, but meaningless, because it's not the distance you walk with your feet, but the one you cross with your mind and soul that matters'*.

Basically, to get anywhere in the Labirynt, one had to survive the tasks that it placed in front of you, all the while without dying for some inane reason like lack of food and water. We had met Janus and stumbled upon Ranch 3G, where I managed to get something useful for our island and learned of the unavoidable eventual betrayal from Geryon, which led a cutthroat business based on 'if I can get away with it, I'll do it', which admittedly, was something that I could understand, even appreciate, if only it didn't put me in the viewfinder of his greed.

Apparently, now we were going to deal with a couple of incredibly powerful monsters. Could we take the first turn to change direction? Yes, could we survive long enough for the Labirynt to pose another challenge to us instead of letting my group roam aimlessly among its never-ending tunnels? I didn't wish to bet on it.

Without a word, I took the path that turned left, directing Mera with the pressure of my knees and securing the helm over my head. The good news: the left tunnel was straight with no side exits, twists, or turns. The bad news was that the path we walked apparently disappeared on our backs, forbidding us from turning back.

"Uh, Icarus... the tunnel is disappearing behind us." Abigail lamely pointed out, making me scoff.

"We're committed to this direction." I said without inflexion: there was neither the time nor the opportunity to change my approach to the Labirynt, we would face whatever head-on, running around like headless chickens was meaningless. And so, with a light tap of my heels on Mera's sides, she started to trot forward. Eventually, we ran into an enormous stone arch that shimmered slightly in the dimming light.

Just as we crossed it, I noticed that we were in a twenty-foot-square cement room, while the opposite wall was covered with metal bars. Just as I turned, I saw that instead of the opening in the tunnel that we had just come from there was a smooth stone surface, lacking any sign of the Labirynt.

"What in Hades?" Abigail looked as flabbergasted as me, while Charles tentatively tugged on the bars while covering his nose with his free hand. Through the bars, we could see rows of cells in a ring around a dark courtyard, with at least three stories of metal doors and metal catwalks.



"A prison," I said, my mind milking what little of my foreknowledge was still useful to me: "Alcatraz, I'd say."

"Shh," the satyr interrupted me, "Listen."

Somewhere above us, deep sobbing echoed through the building. There was another sound, too a raspy voice muttering something that I couldn't make out. The words were strange, like rocks in a tumbler.

"We're in San Francisco then." Abigail whispered between a shuddering landslide-like breath and another, making me wonder why the Labirynt seemed to like me this fucking much. It couldn't be a coincidence, could it? I met Janus, and soon later we managed to rest and get what we needed at Geryon's, and now, we just *happened* to stumble upon the last of the Hecatonchīres, soon after I started to look for an Immortal to help with my island's project?

Without uttering a word, I hopped off my steed and leveraged my weapon against the bars, unhinging those quickly enough for us to walk across, horses included. Both my mare and Abigail's flaming horse seemed to be nervous, but they had both been raised for war, and thusly trained to keep quiet as long as we held a hand over their snouts. I spotted a telling glint in Mera's eye and I stared her down until she submissively looked at the ground. *I'm not eager to get my fingers bitten off, thank you very much.*

Surely enough, Charles let out a quiet gasp, and as I looked where he was pointing, my stomach did a somersault. On the second-floor balcony, across the courtyard, was a monster more horrible than anything I'd ever seen before.

It was sort of like a centaur, with a woman's body from the waist up. But instead of a horse's lower body, it had the body of a dragon: at least twenty feet long, black and scaly with enormous claws and a barbed tail. Her legs were twisting columns of slithering snakes that hissed against each other, hundreds of vipers darting around, constantly looking for something to bite.

The woman's hair was also made of snakes, like a Gorgon's, but around her waist, where the woman part met the dragon part, her skin bubbled and morphed, occasionally producing the heads of animals: a vicious wolf, a bear, a lion, as if she were wearing a belt of ever-changing creatures. I got the feeling I was looking at something half-formed, a monster so old it was from the beginning of time, before shapes had been fully defined.

The horses remained quiet as we stilled behind a half-raised wall, the afternoon's shadows granting us some small cover. In any case, the monster wasn't paying us any attention. It seemed to be talking to someone inside a cell on the second floor. That's where the sobbing was coming from. The dragon woman said something in her weird rumbling language.

As the monster tromped toward the stairwell, vipers hissing around her legs like grass skirts, Abigail's hand clamped on my shoulders as if to yank me away, and as she asked: "What the fuck is *that*?", Kampê spread huge bad wings she kept folded against her dragon back. She leapt off the catwalk and soared across the courtyard.

A hot sulfurous wind blasted my face as the monster flew over, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. There was something clearly wrong about Kampê, something that screamed of ruin and pain, something that I couldn't think of as a mere Monster. No, she was the child of a Primordial, older than the first Titanomachy,

"H-h-horrible," Charles breath came in in ragged gasps, "I've never smelled any monster that strong."

"Kampê," I spoke slowly, hoping that some kind of solution would present itself, "Motherless daughter of Tartarus, high headed *Κάμπη* ... for all the many crooked shapes of her whole body."

I turned my head towards my pale companions, my head trying to figure out a way to dispose of the beast. "A thousand crawlers from her viperish feet, spitting poison afar, were fanning Enyo to a flame, a mass of misshapen coils. Round her neck flowered fifty various heads of wild beasts: some roared with lion's heads like the grim face of the riddling Sphinx; others were spluttering foam from the tusks of wild boars; her countenance was the very image of Scylla with a marshalled regiment of thronging dog's heads. Doubleshaped, she appeared a woman to the middle of her body, with clusters of poison-spitting serpents for hair. Her giant form, from the chest to the parting-point of the thighs, was covered all over with a bastard shape of hard sea-monsters' scales. The claws of her wide-scattering hands were curved like a crooktalon's sickle. From her neck over her terrible shoulders, with tail raised high over her throat, a scorpion with an icy sting sharp-whetted crawled and coiled upon itself. Such was manifold shaped Campe as she rose writhing, and flew roaming about earth and air and briny deep, and flapping a couple of dusky wings, rousing tempests and arming gales, that black-winged nymph of Tartarus: from her eyelids a flickering flame belched out far-travelling sparks. Yet heavenly Zeus ... killed that great monster, and conquered the snaky Enyo Cronos"

"What?" Charles breathed heavily now, as the words that left my mouth described her with the same precision of the Greeks of Old, and Abigail appeared transfixed in horror as she asked: "You're telling me that Zeus is the only one to ever kill that thing?"

"Not alone," I grimaced, "he was helped by the Hecatonchīres, alone... I don't think he would have had a chance."

"The Heka-what?" Abigail asked.

"The Hundred-Handed Ones," Charles cut in, "They called them that because...well, they had a hundred hands. They were elder brothers of the Cyclopes. Kampê was the jailer," he said. "She worked for Kronos. She kept them locked up in Tartarus, tortured

them always, until Zeus came. He killed Kampê and freed Cyclopes and Hundred-Handed Ones to help fight against in the Titanomachy."

"And now Kampê is back," Abigail said her eyes half crinkled as if to hold away the images of that unholy monstrosity.

"Yeah, and guess who is she keeping in that cell?" I smiled grimly, I knew that Kampê was beyond us. It was so far beyond our reach that it wasn't even funny, but I knew, even from I was, that I disliked the idea of letting someone, no matter how resilient, be tortured and kept in chains.

Yet, maybe for the first time since Ladon almost ate me, I felt *fear*. Shit tended to hit the fan when demigods sinned of hubris, and while I habitually skirted that line, I was also very careful about not stomping on the feet of people more than simply able of smithing me from afar.

***I am free.*** Even as my mantra washed over me, I felt that it made no difference: I was freaking out. I never directly acted against the events that were yet to come to pass, not since Thalia had been turned into a tree despite my avoiding that the first time it happened.

Without another word, and feeling the stare of my companions heavy on my back, we approached the cell, hearing the weeping becoming louder and louder. When I first saw the creature inside, I wasn't sure what I was looking at. He was roughly human-size and his skin was very pale, the colour of milk. He wore a loincloth very much as Atlas did under the Sky, while his feet seemed too big for his body, with cracked dirty toenails, eight toes on each foot. But the top half of his body was the weird part. He made Janus look downright normal. His chest sprouted more arms than I could count, in rows, all around his body. The arms looked somewhat normal, even as they bulged with power that their owner didn't dare express, but there were so many of them, all tangled together, that his chest looked kind of like a forkful of spaghetti somebody had twirled together. Several of his hands were covering his face as he sobbed.

Without another word, Abigail remained on the lookout while Charles moved to seek for a way out of the dead-end in which Kampê was keeping the Hundred-Handed One.

"Briares." I spoke loudly enough that my voice could reach him without travelling outside of the cell, and as an answer, he looked up.

His faces were long and sad, even if some expressed clear surprise both about my presence and more than likely because of the flaming horse at my side. Each of his visages had a crooked nose and bad teeth, with a splattering of ichor trailing over his skin from the countless wounds his jailor had inflicted upon her prisoner. He had deep brown eyes, with no whites or black pupils, like they were made out of clay.

"Run while you can, little demigod," Briares said miserably, "I cannot help you." he immediately tried to shatter whatever hope I had about our conversation.

"You are a Hundred-Handed One, Briares," I spoke soothingly, offering a large cube of ambrosia to his nearest hand, "if you so wished, you could tear the sky asunder."

Briares wiped some of his noses with five or six hands, while tentatively, almost fearfully, he brought the ambrosia to his more hopeful face. Several others were fidgeting with little pieces of metal and wood from a broken bed.

"I cannot," Briares moaned even as the one face that tasted ambrosia smiled blissfully, "Kampê is back! The Titans will rise and throw us back into Tartarus."

"They won't win," I tried to reassure him, "the Fates run in circles Briares, you were a prisoner once, weren't you? And yet, then you were set free, and Olympus won."

Immediately, more or less twenty of Briares's faces morphed into something else: same brown eyes, but otherwise totally different features. He had an upturned nose, arched eyebrows, and a weird smile, like he was trying to act brave, but then the vast majority of his faces turned back to what it had been before.

"No good," he lamented, "I cannot be free."

"Why not?" I asked simply, "You don't need me to break either your chains or the bars that keep you from the larger world."

Briares briefly looked at me like I was an idiot, only to frown heavily and plaster his faces on his hands, as if to hide from the world: "Kampê."

"So... you'd rather stay here? Tortured until the day you forget yourself?" I tilted my head without losing sight of the face that had tasted the ambrosia I had given him. I was hoping that the small kindness would rise some spark of hope from within the formidable creature

Briares sniffled: "I have no choice."

"Don't you?" I retorted, "You could fight her until your death." I shrugged at his disbelieving faces: "That's what you risk when you take everything away from someone, Kampê doesn't realize it, does she? When everything is lost, there is nothing left to lose."

Briares's hands closed into fists for a single instant before they returned to covering his faces, where he restarted with his sobbing: "I cannot win..."

"But you *can*!" I hissed as I walked closer to the last of the Hekatónkheires: "Where are your brothers, Briares?" I asked suddenly, turning a good forty of his faces into a mourning state I couldn't help but sympathize with.

"...gone..." his answer came into a ragged, hollow breath that made my heart cringe, I wasn't risking Kampê's fury only to inflict even more grief on a prisoner, but I needed to shake him in some way, and so, I landed a hand upon the clammy skin of the last of the Hekatónkheires, trying to push my *I am free* mantra into him. As I shaped the Mist with nary a thought around us, I remembered with stark clarity the weight of the sky, my vertebrae being fused together with a blowtorch, the uncaring ground making mush of my kneecaps, the sheer hopelessness of something that I had freely brought onto myself.

Being free wasn't about being happy. I realized as I shared that experience with skilful manipulation of the Mist. Being free wasn't even about being hopeful. No, it was about recognizing who you were, and what you were willing to compromise upon, versus the things you'd rather die than being deprived of. While I gained the title of Skyholder, I had simply refused to give up, to stop pushing, to fold to the whim of something that was clearly beyond me.

The possibility, remote but terrible, of being left there by Atlas, *did* exist. I had refused to see that at the time, but in hindsight, my foolishness should have claimed my life many times over. But in the opposite fashion of how Briares was behaving now, I had refused to simply allow the weight of the Sky to crush me. I was trying to convene what I would do if turned into a slave: "Kampê cannot torture you any more than she's already doing." pleaded him, "let's defeat her together instead, if we succeed, you'll be free, if we fail, you'll be free."

With those grim words, I turned and left: "I'll be back after the sunset, I think my friends and I can dump the top of the island over her head, it won't be a problem to you, will it? You'll be welcome to help." As I mounted over Mera, I shot a wild smile at the last of the Hekatónkheires: "In any case, you'll be free before the dawn."

"Guys," I recalled the others while I led us in in a set of cells that were out of the way: "I know that we cannot actually fight Kampê." I smiled at the relieved sighs from both of my companions, "But we can still bury her alive under the rest of the island."

As I shared with them my admittedly half-baked plan, which relied heavily both on luck and Briares, I witnessed the expressions of my companions shift from exasperated to despaired, to furious, to hopeless, only to cycle back and return to exasperated.

"You want us to rig the supporting areas of Alcatraz with Greek Fire." Abigail forced herself to breathe slowly in order to not stab me in a raptus of fury, while Charles was simply staring at his own hands like was wondering if he was strong enough to strangle me.

"And if Charles could use the Mist to prepare us a vessel to sail away from the island it would be for the best. We can even use it to take the mortals that would remain on the island with us, I wouldn't wish Kampê's rage upon anyone." I nodded thoughtfully, acutely aware that such a direct challenge towards the span of a primordial was more

likely than not the most reckless thing that I ever did, and I had once defied both the gods of Sun and Moon, even if in different ways.

After a brief discussion, during which my companions may have addressed me in a less than complimentary manner, Abigail and I settled down near the horses, letting Charles sneak outside and start manipulating the mist necessary to divert the mortal from the ferry that we would be using in a few hours to escape, hopefully with Briares, from the fury of Kampê.

"I still think that destroying the island would have been our best chance." I protested once it was made clear that neither of my companions was willing to destroy Alcatraz only to the off chance of providing a distraction for our escape.

"Well, both Charles and I still think that it's a fucking dumb idea to free Briares from an above-Ladon-tier monster, but you don't see us complaining, do you?" Abigail snapped back even as she tested the tension of her bow, "And waiting for the sunset is even dumber, only because my father hates you, it doesn't mean it would *fuck us up* as you've put it."

I simply arched an eyebrow at her objection, letting my blatant disbelief shine plainly on my face: "I'd rather not risk it: remember the Rule Number One?"

"Immortals are cunts." she somberly replied even as her eyes darted across the small room, unwilling to meet mine.

I settled down near my horse, my back resting against her flank while I waited for the opportune time for us to strike, distantly hearing the soft music of Charles, who was busy slowly but surely evacuating the island.

Barely three minutes into my impromptu shut-eye time, my eyes snapped open as Mera hastily rose to her feet, making me follow suit when I spotted Abigail already seated on her horse, her knees lightly pressing against the flaming-equine's sides, spurning him forward with caution.

I immediately followed suit, my mouth shut lest I made an inopportune noise and attracted the attention of what Abigail was evidently trying to sneak up upon, while I let my eyes look freely for the source of her decision to leave the relative safety of our hiding spot.

The soft clops of the horses echoed across the unnervingly quiet prison, and soon enough we returned to a position from which we were capable of spying the vast expanse of Kampê's back, something that I wouldn't wish on anyone, let me tell you. While my eyes moved up and down the scorpion tail that jittered in the air, finally my ears managed to pick up the rumbling and unnerving sound that was Kampê's tongue,

"She has captured Charles, I guess she plans to interrogate him, or he'd be already dead." Abigail's eyes pierced the dim light of the courtyard like lasers, and she informed me of the situation.

*Well, it was nice to believe we had a reasonable plan until it lasted.* I grimaced as I recovered two small jars of greek fire from the saddle's bag: "Try to blind her while I keep her away from you? Then we free them and flee?"

I wanted to sound sure about my plan, but even as I looked over the monstrous form of our soon to be opponent, I felt my determination waver, causing my plan to come out as a tentative proposition. Then I heard the crackling of a whip, and the unmistakable composite sound of Birares fifty-voices hiss in a combination of pain and fear. I gritted my teeth at the sound, looking over the pale visage of Abigail, who gulped.

*I am free.* My mantra managed to keep me going as I spurred my horse forward, and attacked what was likely one of the Big Nopes existent in the Greek World.

AN

**Yeah, fucking Briares! In the books, he makes a talk about repaying his debt to his saviours, and I've already introduced a certain goddess that pairs with him, I wonder if you've spotted it even when Icarus didn't.**

**I've been thinking, since there is a Giant in Alaska already, awaiting slowly for Gea, why can't Briares already be under the care of Kampe dearest?**

**Besides, I wanted to snag him, if nothing else, to silence the nay-sayers that have somehow determined that I'm going to follow canon. How did you (you know who you are) reach that conclusion after reading 100k words about a Self Insert looking for a way to fuck up Fate?**

AN about horses

**Ok, to those that object to the possibility of horses fitting in the environment of Alcatraz... well, Kampê is fucking huge, and I don't hear you complaining about her with Riordan, do I?**

**To the guy that commented about the terrible smell of carnivore animals' shit, referencing to my using it to fertilize the island... dude, they're flesh-eating horses raised by a three-headed asshole, for an imaginary island conquered by demigods, and your problem is about the kind of smell they give off? Why are you reading fantasy again?**

AN Patron for the city

No, I'm not going to limit the name of the city because of the eventual patron, ideally, the city name would be in greek, meaning something that makes sense with Icarus' character, but without blatantly inviting the fury of either gods or fates (so nothing along the lines of 'forever free' or 'invincible') and the one that PMd me... White Harbour is kind of cool, but I dislike shit being named with a colour in it, never mind white. There is already a White House, a White Moon, and the standard White population in Camp, that Riordan adjusted in the second series, adding a native American half-blood.

I've already said no to Primordials as patrons, and obviously, titans that actively fought Olympus are off.

Rhea really doesn't click.

Hybris is more a spirit than a god, so maybe I'll have her make an appearance, but she's more something that kind of influences mortals. She was a spirit (daemon) or goddess of insolence, violence, and outrageous behaviour, which is admittedly well spot on, but hardly something that Zeus wouldn't strike down out of outrage.

Persephone is actually cool, and she'll have a part in the city, but I'm not willing to disclose more.

Desponia is just a bit too obscure, even for me.

Komos is fucking cool, I agree, but a god of anarchy as the basis for a city? It doesn't sound so smooth, does it?

Aglaea is a daughter of lawful conduct, that in Greek Mythology is obviously directly linked with Zeus, who is a paranoid bastard.

Thank you all for the suggestions, and I've picked one among several, adding my spin to it, eventually, I'll reach the point in which the Patron will actually be declared, you'll see!

## Chapter 20: The Price of Hybris

*I am free. My mantra managed to keep me going as I spurred my horse forward, and attacked what was likely one of the Big Nopes existent in the Greek World.*

### The Price of Hybris

I threw the two jars of greek fire by the useful rope tied around their necks, just as Mera's hindquarters pushed hard against the cement and for an instant, I felt like I was



flying. My legs clamped hard against the flanks of my horse, both to be ready to guide her with the pressure of my knees, and in order to not be unsaddled during the imminent impact. Tensing my core muscles I lunged with my still unnamed naginata, the celestial bronze part of the blade gleaming eagerly as it neared the objective.

My horse weighted around 800 kilograms, for she was all-powerful muscles and sturdy bones, ready to trample any army, I weighted around 80 kilograms, and that was without tallying my armour, weapons or the contents of my saddle's bags. Such a weight was focused and leveraged with the two meters long haft of my chosen weapon, so, just as my horse began her descent from the assault on the back of Kampê, I managed to exercise an unbelievable amount of force, coupled with whatever metaphysical power demigods inherently had.

I didn't aim for Kampê's back, nor for her neck, I wasn't under the illusion that a single sneak attack would be able to kill her, so I opted for the second optimal target: her scorpion tail. The first objective when facing someone vastly outside your reach and strength was to reduce mobility, or, if you can't manage it, its one-hit one-kill weaponry.

The point of my spear met unerringly the center of the scorpion's sting's base. The chitinous structure cracked immediately under my assault, just an instant before Mera's hooves touched again the floor, where she pushed again in order to move out of retaliation that came too quickly to be real.

Kampê's tail shuddered while the creature whirled with a howling, hissing roar spewing forth both from her actual mouth and the several ever-shifting animal faces that separated her womanly half from the dragon one.

I bent forward on Mera's back, feeling the air on my nape wail horribly when Kampê's malformed wing cut just an inch above me, and I was never more grateful for my admittedly impulsive purchase at Geryon's, which now proved her worth by hightailing away from the Tartarus' spawn.

As Mera galloped in a tight circle in order to bring us on the opposite side of the courtyard, the unholy voice of Kampê resounded in my ears, hissing just as the steel on my blade did now that it had a tar-like liquid running over it, happy result of my first assault: "What's this? A little demigod coming to his death?"

My eyes returned to my opponent, and I saw the revolting face of the monster turn into cruel amusement, her eyes open and gleaming of a hellish orange tint that made it look like her skull was the only thing containing all the misshapen forms of Tartarus itself. I opened my mouth to make a witty retort, to distract her if nothing else, but when she took a step forward on her dragon legs, hundreds of snakes slithering around her body, I gulped and remained quiet. My focus went instead to steel my resolve, just as the two jars of greek fire I had thrown before lunging landed upon her back, where they shattered, unleashing a viridescent gale of flames that clung to her form with a hungry woosh.

I expected rage, death threats, even an unstoppable retaliation, but Kampê simply laughed, her unholy voice echoing across the courtyard: "You think your little fire can harm me? I am from Tartarus, foolish demigod!".

Her voice once again brought forth terrible images of sulfur and empty wastelands, of creeping terrors and neverending ruin. But I was committed, and even overwhelmed as I was, I raised my weapon in a silent challenge as I felt my lips part back in a spontaneous snarl. For an instant, I felt like I was holding the Helm of the Adamas during the first freak storm that had claimed two of mine, and then the feeling was gone, leaving me unnaturally ready to face what should not be faced.

She thundered toward me on her dragon legs, hundreds of snakes slithering around her body making her look almost like a wave as she covered the distance between us, and I was saved only by the extensive training of Mera, who bolted on our left as I swung with my weapon against the clawed hand of Kampê.

What was supposed to be a heavy blow capable of staggering anything turned out to be nothing more than a barely acceptable parry as my flesh-eating horse bared her teeth threateningly towards the invincible monster in front of us. I shifted my weight enough for Mera to keep moving while I maneuvered my already ruined naginata in short stabs towards Kampê's eyes, who instinctively flinched back, but not before swinging out with her clawed hands, forcing me to swing with all my strength in order to not get skewered.

Mera briefly hesitated when a wave of sulfuric hot air washed over us, and Kampê was on us like a landslide, a second later, I was flung like a ragdoll across the air, my lungs struggling to take another breath after the previous lungful had been forcefully expelled. The world seemed to blur and spin before coming to an abrupt halt when my other side stopped cold against a wall.

The unbelievable pressure let up for an instant as I fell, my stomach climbing in my throat as the floor rushed me. I knew what to do, place my feet down and roll in order to disperse kinetic energy, so I somewhat managed to stretch my legs and ready myself, and when my feet reached down... I crumpled like wet paper, and for an instant, everything went dark.

The pain surged forth with a pressure that forbade me from drawing breath, and the coppery taste of blood made itself known as my own cheek was scratched by my teeth. With my head still spinning and my sight slowly climbing out of the sudden darkness, I forced myself to take a slow and shallow breath, *pushing* against the pain with all of myself, while I tentatively tried to figure out if my broken ribs had pierced my lungs.

It was telling that the pain of the blow reached me only after I had been slammed against a wall. But I could feel it, no scratch that, I could feel *only* that. Air once more left my lungs in a desperate wheeze as the throbbing pain of my ribcage made itself known with a vengeance, acting as a soundtrack to the rumbling stabbing *hurt* that washed over me every time I tried to breathe.

I was free, but the conceptual power of my mantra did not extend to freeing myself from pain. I was part of the physical word, and while I could gain some form of strength by remembering my deeds, apparently it was power only present in whatever metaphysical realm the Gods seemed to reside in. *A pity, it would have been right useful.*

My eyes rolled around desperately in time to see what looked like an endless streak of light repeatedly stab into Kampê, coming from... *a wave of fire?* Then I blinked, bringing into focus the glorious form of Abigail rushing around over Feb, her flaming horse.

With a heavy grunt and almost magically ignoring the pain of my body, I twisted the Mist around Kampê, making her dodge in one direction only for her head to slam against a catwalk, making her stagger in surprise long enough for my hands to close around the haft of my naginata, only for my eyes to crinkle in disgust when I saw the destroyed steel of the blade.

Where before there was a straight blade that had looked like the crystallized form of twin flames meeting from opposite sides, one celestial bronze and the other Damascus steel, now only the bronze side actually remained, its edge unmarred by the tar-like ichor of Kampê. Where before there was steel, now only a blackened ruin seemed to cling to the still bright bronze. *I guess there is a reason why nobody goes around with a blade like this.* I grimaced as I wavered for another instant between consciousness and Morpheus' realm.

With yet another push of sheer willpower, my eyes remained open as they roamed across the courtyard in time to see Mera bite off a viper that lunged from one of Kampê's rear legs, and I once more twisted the Mist around our clearly superior opponent, who seemed to grow wise to my tricks and turn towards me with her orange eyes shining with a promise of ruin.

While Kampê lumbered towards me, Abigail didn't let up her assault as I used my weapon as a crutch in order to stand, my trembling legs almost refusing to listen to me. I could feel my heart hammering in my chest, and I distractedly wondered if I would be able to count the beats between that instant and my imminent death.

Tartarus' daughter stopped for a moment in her advance in order to swing her sting-less tail like a bludgeoning whip towards Abigail, whose horse reared back and spewed ineffective fire over the offending appendage.

I started to breathe frequently and shallowly in order to spare my ribs from the worse of the stress just in time to climb on Mera's back once she reached me, and once more I cautiously engaged Kampê.

My group's only advantage? The lumbering form of Kampê had less maneuverability than us in the courtyard and in the balconies, nevermind the catwalks that our actually magical horses were barely capable of jumping from and to. Not for the first time, I

wondered what kind of bullshit breeding program Geryon had applied to the line of equines we purchased. And yet, it was blatantly clear that there was nothing we could do capable of stopping the Jailer of Cyclops.

Our weapons, while capable of wounding her, were clearly not up to the task of inflicting wounds capable of actually *hurting* the monster. *This is a big fucking problem.*

"Free them, then back me up!" Abigail managed to shout amidst a flurry of golden arrows that glinted brightly even in the dim light of the courtyard, while the Kampê snarled terribly and whirled on her, only to get a mouthful of fire-breath from the demigoddess' flaming horse, which then was directed to run in a small circle around the lumbering form of Cyclops' Jailer.

Once more I made extensive use of my skill with the Mist, throwing what little there was left of my Greek Fire on Kampê's face, hoping that she would remain blinded until the fire was snuffed out. Without a sound beyond the hissing breath that left my lips, I slid off my horse and stumbled inside of Briares and Charles' cell, where I didn't waste time before swallowing the mouthful of nectar I still had on me and slapping Charles in order to awaken him.

While the Satyr groggily came to his senses, I leveraged the haft made of Hera's tree of Golden Apples to unhinge the bars that separated the large form of Briares from the courtyard, only to immediately swing my ruined weapon against the chain that kept the Hundred-Handed One prisoner, feeling that it was almost like a bind of Circe's magic. There was more to the chain than what I could consciously observe, but it didn't matter, I despised chains, because "***I am free!***".

I roared, more with my mind and soul than with my ragged voice, and the dark iron shattered under the weight of my strength of will.

With the corner of my eye, I spied Charles rising to his feet: "Prepare us a ferry to escape!" I ordered him just as I turned towards Briares.

"Abigail and I cannot defeat her." I freely admitted to the Hundred-Handed One, "But with your help, we can all escape, otherwise we're lost."

"I-I can't" his faces contorted in a mismatched mess of fearful and hopeless expressions, but I found one face, the same that had tasted ambrosia a few hours before, looking with desperate intensity towards the courtyard, and the small stretch of sky that was visible from our position.

"Will you let the only ones to help you in the last 2000 years die, Briares?" I felt the ethereal sensation that marked each of my discoveries about the extent of my semi-divine powers stir within me, but there was no water to command, no trick to pull, there was only me, forced to deal with my neverending need to push forward, "I have an island, hidden in the Sea, she won't find you there."

"That's not fair." but even as he spoke, a familiar hopeful face popped up from his usual sea of despair.

"Life and death are not fair. Kampê's not going to be fair if we hang around. She's going to blame you for ripping off the bars. I and mine are risking everything for you, now come on!" I insisted, forcefully shattering the last chain that in theory kept Briares from running.

Briares sniffled: "Unfair demigod." but his only hopeful face was now staring at me with wide eyes, desperate eyes, eyes that had seen everything being stripped from their owner, eyes that now landed on me with all the weight of more than 2000 years of agony. With a sigh that echoed across his fifty heads, he scampered to his feet and followed me out of the cell. I started to feel hopeful. All we had to do was get outside and board a ferry to the mainland.

My eyes landed once more on the courtyard, just in time to see the Greek Fire over Kampê's face splutter and die as her glowing orange eyes, still lacking anything resembling iris or pupil, found my form, and just behind me, her prized prisoner.

I heard a multiple whimper echo from behind me just as another volley of golden tinted arrows speared Kampê, who simply broke the shafts and let the arrowheads burn in her tar-like ichor as she lumbered towards us, and despite everything, I felt my lips pull back in a wide, taunting smile that showed just too many teeth to be anything but a threatening motion.

Then my eyes landed on the shredded form of Feb, his pale guts hidden under a scorching stretch of scars that ran cleanly through the dead horse and deep into the concrete of the floor. His fire had been snuffed out like a candle, leaving lazily curling streaks of smoke in the torrid air of the courtyard.

My eyes then found the exhausted form of Abigail, who was already directing my Mera up a catwalk while she sat backward on her saddle and kept up her supporting role.

Without stopping to consider any other option, we ran. We needed to reach the ferry, and then the city, in which we could hopefully disappear. I channeled my neverending need to push forward, and we moved as fast as our flesh allowed us to.

We bolted down the catwalk. This time Briares was happy to not only follow me, but he instead sprinted out front, a hundred arms waving in panic and mad hope that his torment was finally going to end. Behind us, I heard the sound of giant wings as Kampê took to the air. She hissed and growled like a bubbling spurt of lava from a volcano, accompanied by the sinister whistling of wings that seemed to cut the very air as she flew.

We scrambled up the stairs, through a corridor, past an empty guard's station and somehow we managed to reach outside, where we could spot a ferry with Charles

waiting for us at the controls, which were, luckily enough, easy enough to use. "Punch down the walls!" I shouted to Briares, who was far too gone to question me, and with a mighty heave of his ridiculously powerful back, *broke* Alcatraz while we kept running.

When a hundred fists of Briares landed at the same time on the nearest structure, the concrete and the very ground seemed to ripple like water only to shatter as if it was made of glass, crumbling inwards and burying Kampê beyond our sight. We were temporarily safe. We ran through the jail yard and out the gates of the prison, the monster luckily trapped beneath the rubble while Mortals screamed and ran, fearful of the earthquake that the Mist convinced them was the true responsibility for the disaster. Emergency sirens began to blare.

Sadly, we could still hear the outraged hissing of thousands of snakes from the Pit, along with the tearing sound of metal being shredded and the thunder of rock being shattered. After being inside for so long, the daylight almost blinded me. Tourists were milling around, taking pictures. The wind whipped cold off the bay. In the south, San Francisco gleamed all white and beautiful, while in the north, over Mount Tamalpais, I could spy the endless column of *Sky* weight down on Atlas' back.

"Straight to the closest stretch of land! Don't bother with a pier!" Abigail shouted to the satyr at the moment my horse landed on the ferry, carrying her on her back, immediately followed by my trembling form and Briares, who was busy looking at his hands in what I could tell was a dumb stupor.

I grinned between my ragged breaths at the last of the Hecatonchîres: "I told you didn't I? If you wanted to, you could tear the very sky asunder." then I folded like a wet napkin and rested, sprawled, on the deck of the ferry.

Roughly five minutes after our hasty departure from Alcatraz, that now appeared to be like a random amount of rocks where pieces of buildings had been randomly tossed, with its lonely, abandoned lighthouse remaining standing as a monument to the ruin the rest of the island had witnessed, I heard it: a *thud* like sound that was immediately accompanied by a change in the air's pressure. A shrill scream born of the unholy combination oh howls, roars, hisses, and even the clacking of crab clamps far too large to be real.

After that unholy sound, I swallowed what ambrosia Abigail could spare, and wobbled back on my feet. *I am free.*

*Thud.* The glinting sun of the sunset seemed to forget completely about me, and its light shuddered over San Francisco.

"Well done Mera." I patted my horse distractedly even as she trembled with large patches of fur drenched in sweat. *I am free.*

*Thud.* A hot wave of air, smelling of sulfur and *hate* and *ruinous stampedes across our backs* washed over the bay of the city.

"We'll make it." I rested my hand on the thigh of Abigail with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. *I am free.*

"She killed my horse." the daughter of Apollo flatly replied, "We're killing the half-formed bitch."

*Thud.* The vibration carried through the air, seared through my still very much broken ribs, making me stumble as I tried to remain on my feet on the deck of the ferry.

A minute later, Abigail resumed her offensive with arrows that managed to glint in the light of the setting sun, singing in her father's domain even as the sun approached the horizon.

With a thundering crash, the ferry, still pushing forward with all of its might cracked against the Pier 45 of San Francisco, and as soon as we could, we jumped on land and found ourselves on a miraculously empty stretch of road that coasted the water, deciding to immediately run away from the quickly gaining shape of Kampê, that still soared ominously through the air, her wings beating the tempo of our escape.

"How do we kill that bithc?" Abigail seethed through her teeth as we moved, causing my mind to fruitlessly come up with a solution. 'I have no idea' didn't seem to be an acceptable answer.

Truly, my purpose had been freeing Briares, even befriending him, and that much we had halfway accomplished. Killing Kampê however, as a whole different kettle of fish. It was uncommon for Abigail to be the one to spur me towards an impossible task. Hell, it was uncommon for me to *not* be the one already trying the impossible, but then again, I had no idea what process the daughter of Apollo had to undergo in order to gain the loyalty of her flaming horse, which the daughter of Tartarus had happily slaughtered.

"Keep moving," Briares wailed, "she is behind us!"

We ran to the beginning of the Pier, soon finding ourselves in need to swerve among the regular mortals that very much missed the extremely problematic presence of Kampê. With Abigail keeping up our pitiful delaying tactic through her quickly depleting reserve of arrows, and Charles using the Mist in order to open us a path through the mortals, I was somewhat free of thinking about a way to 'kill the bitch', as the demigoddess riding my horse wanted.

"Briares dropped Alcatraz on her, it didn't work for long." I proposed distractedly, eyeing the skyscrapers around us.

"What about the mortals?" Charles pointed out as he ran.

"What about them?" I replied, biting down on my annoyance. Mortals died every fucking day, I was trying to keep my friends alive after having pissed off one of the top 5 monsters against which it was plain stupid to act. Kampê was in the top tier of monsters. Never defeated by demigods, only by a god with the help of others. Fucking hell, I would have preferred to face Ladon, at least he couldn't see through the Mist without even trying.

"We can't just randomly choose to condemn hundreds of mortals!" Abigail made her opinion known while Mera whined in irritation.

*But we can.* I kept my thought quiet as we ran, moving my thoughts in another direction. Had Abigail's Horse survived, Feb could have blown fire in order to clear us a path forward while hopefully provide a barrier against the daughter of Tartarus, instead, Mera covered that role by snarling hatefully at everything in her path.

With Charles opening the way with music that made the mortals uneasily leave the area and Briares' disbelieving behavior as he stuck close to us, we ducked between the buildings, hoping to suddenly stumble upon an opportunity to escape. *Either we can ignore collateral damage, or we run away.* I wanted to point out the foolishness of holding back on the account of bystanders when against a monster that far outstripped our might, but it seemed redundant.

*If Abigail didn't want to endanger mortals, she should drop her wish to kill Kampê, because she's going to rain fire and brimstone in our wake.* It was obvious, and if the daughter of Apollo ignored that point, I wasn't going to make her see sense while we escaped.

The angle of the building beyond which we had just ducked exploded. Tourists screamed as Kampê appeared from the dust and rubble, her wings spread out as wide as the whole fucking road. She was holding two swords, long bronze scimitars that glowed with a weird greenish aura, boiling wisps of vapor that smelled sour and hot even at a distance.

"Poison!" Charles yelped between a flurry of notes and the following one: "Don't let those things touch you or..."

"Or we'll die?" I coughed out some form of laughter while Abigail was busy insulting everyone that had ever held a sword and Briares whimpered after a half-hearted thought dedicated to defending us.

"Well...after you shrivel slowly to dust, yes." Charles completed his frankly unnecessary warning as we passed an ATM Bank of America while we ducked into Bay Street and kept running in search of a solution.

"Let's avoid the swords," I agreed as I half stumbled and half-used my weapon as a crutch to keep going forward, "Briares we could really use some of your help now!"



Instead, Briares looked like he was trying to shrink even smaller. He appeared to be wearing his absolutely horrified faces, even if one of his visages appeared regretful as he looked at me. Kampê thundered toward us on her dragon legs, hundreds of snakes slithering around her body. Even so, he started to casually pick parked cars and minivans, flinging them behind us without truly taking aim.

Nevertheless, he managed to buy us time, and we kept moving.

That was the end of the debate. There was no fighting that thing, she carried with her the wrongness of Tartarus, and... *If we die, we die*. The thought wedged itself without my consent upon my slightly hysterical mind, and I considered, only for an instant, *what if*.

*We've reached this point, haven't we?* It was true. We did some incredible shit this far, without a prophecy to guide us, without blanket protection given from the Fates, relying only on our skills and the general support of some of the gods, that more likely than not were the only reasons why we hadn't been erased from existence by a fit of boredom. Better than the heroes of old, and surely better than the childish adventure that Percy Jackson was going to have. *Only because we could*.

*Abigail wants her dead*. A part of me pretended to actually care about the demigoddess' foolish wish in order to make myself feel less guilty about my impending decision of actually fighting Kampê. But I knew the truth. I wanted to fight, no to conquer the myth that was the Jailor of Tartarus. To stand where Zeus stood, and be able one day to laugh this moment off as one of my lesser accomplishments. *Am I going to allow Kampê to push me around when Ouranos didn't succeed in doing the same?*

With those thoughts building up in my mind, I slowed down even more than before, bringing my weapon to bear against the incoming ruin, that had just followed us in a parking lot that Charles' music had just emptied: "She's gaining on us." I stated forcefully between a ragged breath and another, feeling the burning in my legs from the effort of running like no mortal had any business doing, suffering through the weight of my broken ribs, and feeling my head pound with the sheer *importance* of my decision.

We turned into a larger road named Columbus street, where I hoped Briares could find something truly huge to throw at the monster, while Charles grimaced at the feel of the ever-increasing fire that we left in our wake. *Am I going to flee from the consequences of my choice of freeing Briares?*

"The only effect that our last rounds of Greek Fire had was to set the city on fire!" the satyr reprimanded me while at the same time the daughter of Apollo screamed at me in order to make me move faster.

When I hesitated, she actually *sarled*. "Icarus!" Abigail shouted, "We need to go!"

"We need to kill her." I blandly reminded her that she wanted to kill the one that had brutalized Feb.

Kampê barrelled fully into the road, just as the shadows generated by the setting sun swallowed us: "Briares, you don't need to get close, but throw at her whatever you can grab." I spoke quickly, clearly, and without leaving any space for objections. *I already held the sky longer than Herakles, what's to say I can't kill Kampê?*

We found a park, and I felt tentatively hopeful until Charles denied my mute request with a violent shake of his head, forcing us forward. *Herakles and Alexander were the same, but they didn't risk falling under their own weight.* The words of Janus rang in my head like a bell, causing a heavy frown to land on my features.

"Is that a fucking Elementary School?!"

"Kampê is ignoring everything but us, they'll be fine." I dismissed the satyr disbelieving curse as we kept moving, eventually reaching a park that sprouted some kind of commemorative tower. It was white, resembling a fire hose nozzle of some sort. It wasn't anything memorable, less than 60 meters tall, but it gave us options.

***Will you unravel under the weight of your own name?*** The question came without voice, and without a body to utter it. Yet, it carried with it the delightful dissonance of twin voices trying to push my answer in different directions, and I spotted a familiar two-faced god in the corner of my eye, before I blinked, and he disappeared, making me believe that I had only imagined it.

"Abigail!" I indicated the tower, receiving a nod as an answer while she hopped off Mera, who slowed down immediately and seemed to be torn between fleeing and biting the daughter of Apollo.

"Charles, if the nature spirits don't help us here, they'll die anyway." I distractedly informed the satyr as I approached my horse, "You've been a good girl with Abigail, haven't you? We'll find something good to eat soon enough, I promise."

I tightened the latch that kept my helm in place and did the same with the shield that hung from my back as I climbed upon Mera. ***Will you pop under the strain?*** As I directed Mera, my mind dismissing the worrying voices of the bi-faced god, for an instant I felt like I was far away, looking at myself from a third person's eye, and with that detachment, I considered myself. Who I was, what I wished, what I was willing to accept, what I was willing to compromise.

I couldn't state something as foolish as 'I will not retreat', for there was wisdom in knowing when to take a step back. I could not claim as *me* something along the lines 'I will not be moved', because I recognized that the opinion of others could and should be able to change my own.

Then the moment passed, as if Reality had held its breath in order to give me the time to figure out the necessity of another piece to add to the mantra that was my very self, and I

was once more staring at the world through my mismatched eyes, my senses burning brightly for a moment, until I managed to adjust to the adrenaline-fueled circumstances.

My companions would cover my back if it ever came necessary, but the mobility offered by a horse now that we were finally on an open territory wasn't something that I was going to ignore.

I would need every advantage for the frontal assault: "Abigail! Don't waste arrows, her eyes or mouth, if you can, her wrists, set her swings off-balance, Charles, steal a car and set it to crash against her, or fucking get the *trees moving!* Briares... just do whatever, but don't place yourself between us."

I tightened the knees on the sides of my horse and rose my weapon as the furious visage of Kampê neared us, and the motion seemed to set her off: "Little demigods and their great foolishness, little giants and their great fears..." she seemed to almost smile while the orange and unearthly glow of her eyes turned downright poisonous.

A golden arrow shattered itself against the enemy's right wrist, Mera rocketed forward only to disengage, just in time for a car to crumple against the form of Kampê, and I felt a smile stretch my lips: "Thanks Briares!"

In that moment, a shaken choir of voices rose from our surroundings, and roots that had no business moving attempted to trip the monster, whose viper-clad legs tore apart like they were made of water.

Yet, she wasted a couple of seconds on that, and I lunged forward, my ruined naginata battling away the instinctive scimitar's slash of Kampê, while my return blow managed to nick her right wrist, exactly where Abigail's arrow had left a mark. *I am free.* I repeated to myself, taking whatever calm it managed to give me.

Mera's sharpened canines held back the wolf's head sprouted from the conjunction between Kampê's upper and lower halves, trying to tear my leg off. My horse reared back, her celestial bronze horseshoes meeting with force another slash from the monster's right hand.

A golden arrow burrowed itself into Kampê's left eye, making the monster howl in outrage as she blinked, her eyelids breaking the shaft and the arrowhead burning into nothingness inside of the orange eye of the monster. Mera had taken that instant to hightail out of there, and a second later a boulder as large as a minivan slammed into the lumbering form of Tartarus' daughter, buying us a few more seconds.

Another two pebbles were picked up from the ground by Briares' eager hands and were flown faster than I could blink, growing larger and more unforgiving as they neared Tartarus' daughter. A branch from an oak snapped down on the tailbone of the monster, making her turn with an outraged hiss and another wave of sulfurous hot air. I stole a

glance at Abigail, who seemed to read my movements with something akin to precognition while she rained golden arrows upon our opponent.

Mera charged forward while another golden arrow outran us, the first rock thrown by Briares slamming against Kampê hard enough to make her stagger, while the second was broken apart by a twin blow of the monster' scimitars.

The golden arrow landed once more in the beast's left eye, and then I was there, with Mera's hooves battling away the half-formed animal heads attempting to bite me and my unnamed, half-ruined weapon plunging deep into Kampê's right eye, effectively blinding her for a second.

Whatever power and strength I could muster came with each of my strikes, it was in each of my swings, I felt once more like I had once when facing against Thalia, like I had felt while crushing Circe. Whatever power I was due or could command from the sea surged in my arms, all the strength I had been able to exercise since I had gotten to know Atlas was there. Whatever command I had over the Mist was in each of my breaths, but I cared not for illusions. I wanted the world to follow my will, and whatever magic I was inherently capable of came just beyond the edge of the corner of my eye, just beyond my fingertips.

I acted, and I wanted the world to accept what I was doing. *I am free.*

I didn't relent, seeing the oak that had attracted the beast's attention had *unrooted* itself, intertwining its branches around the arms of my opponent, still overextended from when she had broken Briares' second rock. While the ancient tree started to shrivel into dust because of the poison on Kampê's blade, my naginata fell in a downward swing, my ribs howling in protest even as yet another golden arrow landed in the open mouth of the enemy.

The wrist that I had nicked before, that Abigail had knowingly or not marked for me, was cut. Not cleanly, for whatever held Kampê together under whatever passed for her skin wasn't simple flesh, but her right clawed hand was cut free from the rest of her body.

With another sharp torsion, that sent my ribs pleading for mercy that they wouldn't receive, I whipped my weapon in order to strike the blade of the falling scimitar, hurling it towards Briares, who jumped away with a yelp. I laughed even as my eyes reached the top of the nearby tower, from where Abigail looked down upon the battle with an unforgiving rage that suited her.

Mera ran away just in time to avoid being splattered by the immense scorpion-like tail that Kampê used as a bludgeoning weapon to strike us away. But I had eyes only for my naginata. While the celestial bronze appeared immune to whatever bullshit-venom the daughter of Tartarus had going for her, and the wood from Hera's Apple Tree that composed the haft seemed to be unfazed by the toxic substance, the side of the blade that

had once belonged to simple steel, already ruined by the enemy's tar-like ichor, seemed to shudder.

Corrosion came forth ignoring gravity or whatever motion I did to arrest it, and in mere seconds, I was left with a blade that looked right out of a kid's edgy drawing phase. Where the blade had been quenched under a layer of clay, in order to keep it softer and more capable of witnessing pressure, now there was a layer of jagged, unforgiving, and twisted celestial bronze. Where it had once hugged the steel, granting stability to the whole construct, now it appeared like it had been newly quenched both in the tar-like ichor and in whatever poison Kampê's blade carried. Where there had once been harmony and precision, now the weight of Tartarus seemed to twist the very air.

Another rain of rocks, courtesy of Briares, fell upon Kampê, the trees abandoned the fight now that they had witnessed what could befall them, and just like that Charles' music could no longer help us.

"It's now or never!" my knees spurned Mera forward, her hooves thundering on the ruined grass while a deep growl that matched mine echoed forth from her chest. I placed my naginata like I was some fucking knight jousting, and while Abigail kept up her support even as the sun hid behind the skyscrapers that hid us from the horizon, I fought.

The jagged side of my blade was more suited to sawing than to cutting, but I turned the weight of Tartarus upon Kampê herself, and the wounds that I managed to inflict now that she had a single scimitar brought a smile on my face, because they no longer healed after a few minutes.

After another exchange, Kampê started to barrel through most of what Briares threw at her, even as the Hundred-Handed One seemed to grow bolder now that we had shown him that we were capable of keeping our word, and Mera's muscles shivered unconsciously, exhaustion seeping deep into her. Kampê was a ruinous mess, but still very much capable of killing us all. We couldn't relent, couldn't let her room to breathe.

While I kept Kampê's attention on me, Abigail rained golden arrows on the back of the enemy, and in a lull of the fight, given to us by an unusually large boulder thrown by Briares, I looked at my fellow demigod.

At the top of Coit Memorial Tower, Abigail found herself in one of the last stretches of San Francisco where the setting sun still reached, and as I pushed forth my last offensive, my mantra echoing endlessly in my ears, I heard her like she was right next to me: "Πατέρας, if I ever meant anything to you... please, I never asked for anything... **Slayer of the mighty Πύθων, help me.**"

As she finished her whispered prayer, her voice changed, echoing like a golden bell struck by a crystalline battering ram, and Abigail appeared to shine of a light coming from her very skin, blindingly bright, searing hot, unreachable and unstoppable as the very Sun that seemed to place a hand over her shoulder, the arrow ready to fly turning

into a pure white light that forced me to look away, as, for an instant, it looked like the very star that sat at the center of the solar system was less than a meter from me.

Then I felt more than saw her relinquish the hold on the bowstring, and, I *pushed* one last time, with all that I was, like I was once more under the weight of the sky, opposing my existence to the concept of surrendering, ignoring the bursting feeling that overcame my gut, I stabbed blindly with my weapon adding a small swirling motion, hoping that my target hadn't moved at the last second.

A searing pain blasted my head on one side just as the Sun seemed to land on the back of Kampê's head, and everything turned black.

AN

**I'm glad that everybody kind of caught up with the fact that the 'I am free' spiel has gradually made the MC somewhat unhinged. It is something that I did knowingly, and it is clear by now that having only that piece of mantra to refer to is pushing Icarus further and further from anything resembling a reasonable behaviour. He sees a challenge, and he immediately throws himself on it, to hell with anything else. It's not that his mantra gives him the solution to any random problem he faces, but it is something that keeps him from freaking out because of the admittedly batshit crazy series of events that saw him go from using the Mist to steal around and take care only of himself to holding the Sky and setting out with the Adamas.**

**This is my first time actually working towards a character's development, and you've seen thus far that the 'I am free' influence has been steadily growing since he first held the Sky, and despite Janus warning, there is no actually controlling yourself in this particular situation. Until Icarus slams hard against a wall, that will force another 'Truth' upon him, his behaviour will only keep growing more unhinged. He plans, and reasonably well at that, but when a plan falls through he can't even consider pulling back and trying in another way, he'll simply push forward, just like he did when he held the Sky. It's something I have set up and showcased knowingly, and in my head it makes sense.**

**For now, Icarus has no power to defy Fate, as I have clearly showcased with the whole Thalia-turned-tree-situation, will he eventually? I certainly hope so, but I must set up a situation with the Lore available in Greek Myth that can allow such. I already know how that particular part is going to happen, but it won't be for some chapters still, in any case, it is something that I've never seen done anywhere before, so I hope you'll keep enjoying this admittedly long set up.**

**About the Name:**

**As for the pieces of his Name, I didn't want to set the precedent that he's simply able to add pieces to 'himself' anytime he is at risk of dying. That's not how self-discovery works. I don't want to turn his name into a plot device,**

**To recap, after the first introductory Arc, we had the Skyholder Arc, and now we're going to rush through the escalating end of the Odyssey Arc, which I tried to make engaging, but there isn't a truly dynamic way to turn a succession of islands *a la* One Piece into something more entertaining, at least not while keeping up with the Plot that I've set out to accomplish, that admittedly requires a lot of pieces showcased here and there in order to make sense later.**

**About Abigail's bullshittery:**

**I don't know why Riordan hasn't made use of it, but after Zeus, Apollo is the strongest god. At least in open battle: the slayer of the mighty Piton really does not make him justice. It's the fucking SUN. You know, the thing that every sentient race worshipped at one point or another? Besides, it was high time that the gods started butting in directly in Icarus' life.**

**And I couldn't make 2 demigods succeed where Zeus plus 3 Hundred-Handed Ones were the only ones capable of killing Kampê.**

**The whys and the hows, as well as the consequences for what Icarus and his did, will be obviously seen in the following chapter (spoils too!).**

**About other pantheons:**

**About the integration of other pantheons, eventually, the MC will grow too large to not interact with them, but as stated in Riordan's work, each pantheon tends to keep to themselves, and in particular, Hera/Juno rides hard the Prophecy of the Seven in order to bring together the Roman and Greek camp. It's only by her direct intervention that the two manage to interact with something resembling coordination and not immediate violence.**

**'What about Renya? She was on Circe's island' - I actually discovered that fairly recently, and I had nothing in particular already set out for the Roman Pantheon, but yeah, New Rome will have a role. Again, not any time soon.**

**How did the fight with Kampe work out? I don't know if I managed to make it believable/nice-to-read. Opinions? I found out it's difficult for me to describe a fight between a humanoid and a misshapen monster, go figure.**

**Anyway, thank you all for the support and reviews!**

## Chapter 21: A sane Point of View

### A sane Point of View

The park had been completely ruined. Scattered boulders that were once pebbles blocked the trails, crumpled cars stood like crumbles on the ground, while the once green grass had been mostly burned out. Where San Francisco's usually white noise included the occasional siren, now it was all that could be heard along the wooshing of raging flames born from Greek Fire, screams of the mortal victims, and the persistent and undeniable smell of molten tar.

The sun had finally set, and the nightly sky was hidden beyond a cover of lead-like clouds born from the fire. The very air was heavy, the breeze from the ocean moving sluggishly, as if too fearful to take notice of the conditions of the city.

San Francisco cried as its buildings shuddered in the unwelcome flames, and a Satyr sat still on a dead stretch of grass, taking in the enormity of what had just happened. Slowly, as if his ears uncorked after being squashed by the pressure, Charles rose from his seated position, gulping down the guilt born from the ruined surroundings, and even more slowly, disbelief and tiredness let room for an exhausted rage that could not be expressed, lest he killed the demigods responsible for such a ruin.

Charles was fucking tired of Icarus' bullshit.

A group of demigods wants to sail on their own? No Quest? Risky, but the satyr might as well join them, since he had exhausted any other option to find Pan.

Not sacrificing anything before sailing? Dumb, but Poseidon had mellowed out considerably since WW II, and he was basically a kitten when compared to what he was in more ancient times.

Not turning back to drop the clandestine child of Athena? Again, it was dumb, but understandable, and ultimately not Charles's problem. Not until said child freed Prometheus at least.

Adventuring out of curiosity? Kind of risky, but okay, and while the Hydra had proved itself fucking dangerous, they managed. And 6 months of vacation would have turned unbearable if not for the numerous spontaneous orgies that popped up from time to time. Charles knew of the Thyrsus, which satyr could ignore it? That Icarus was a favorite of Dionysus was renowned, even if it raised more than a few eyebrows. Still, they were barely in the sea of Monsters by then, giving another chance to the mad demigod sounded reasonable enough.

Outwitting Circe had been luck. Pure and simple. Pushing said luck by looting her whole fucking island and setting fire to everything before leaving was a tad bit insane, but at



least would buy some goodwill with Ares, which was one of the better ones to have in your angle when shit hit the fan.

Ignoring the perfectly acceptable route of 'not-making-land' in order to dedicate your *very small* crew of demigods to the genocide of an ancient race of giant man-eaters? Fucking insane. There wasn't another way to describe it. Worse? Icarus' crew just went along with it. Not a single objection. And worse of the worst? The Adamas succeeded, and the Laestrygonians were no more.

Meeting Prometheus *again*? It stank of Fate so much that it clogged everybody's noses. But apparently not enough to *not free him again in exchange of him teaching shit to the son of the Fire god*. It was once again sheer dumb luck that the God of the forge hadn't popped a volcano from under their asses.

Going into the Labirynth willingly? Why the fuck not. At that point, Charles was growing a bit skittish from the months of guerrilla on the island anyway. If one had to go insane, might as well do so near one of Dionysus' favorites, at least it should be hilarious.

Founding a city upon the newly conquered island without asking for a patron *first*? Suddenly going into the Labirynth assumed an entirely more fascinating veneer.

Immediately outwitting Janus' trap? Convenient, but then again, Charles was already growing used to the sheer bullshittery that seemed to blossom under Icarus feet every fucking step of the way.

Finding a random hole in the ground that led to Tartarus? Not unheard of, but Charles had read clearly in Icarus' eyes the flash of 'curiosity' that brought him to consider the idea of trying out a jump into Tartarus. For the first time in the satyr's experience, Icarus had taken a sane decision and turned away.

Only to stumble upon a blatantly illegal breeding ranch for unholy combinations of animals that had no business breathing fire, eating humans, or existing altogether. Sure why not, let's strike a deal with the fucker that casually profits from the holy animals which were symbols of the gods. At least Icarus had the good sense of not touching Apollo's cattle.

But apparently, he spent all of his good sense on that decision, because less than an hour later, he was wrestling *bare-handed* against the most potty-mouthed horse Charles had ever had the unfortunate honor to listen to. Never mind that said horse ate raw flesh as the first and the last ingredient of her diet.

Oh, Charles was so fucking tired of Icarus' bullshit. Even if his brief speech about Pan had somewhat unsettled the satyr, it had also given him some sort of twisted hope.

Whether he succeeded in finding the God of the Wild or not, Charles would still fight for Nature. And that was a fact.

Charles didn't even want to think about what Abigail had to do in order to win the allegiance of the fire-breathing horse instead. It was only then that Charles realized for the first time that he held some measure of respect for the insane?... lucky?... for the insanely lucky demigod.

But that wasn't all, oh no! All that shit was stuff that Charles had witnessed 'live'. But the Satyr had heard whispers from the nature spirits about Icarus, they were hard to ignore.

He held the fucking sky!? He even managed to obtain apples, a pity that the Nymphs of the Sunset ate them all, but considering that Hera found out in two seconds flat he had been lucky.

He punched the Oracle!? He scuffled with the Lieutenant of the Hunt!? Seriously, how the fuck was the demigod still alive?

Oh yes, he promised Artemis to find Pan in order to not become the hunted himself. *WHAT. THE. FLYING. FUCK.*

But the last decision beat them all: freeing the prized prisoner of the 4th ranked 'fuck you' to everything that ever existed. After Typhoon, Echidna, and Ladon. She was right there at the top. Fucking Kampê and her fucking smell.

The small measure of gratitude because of Icarus' words about Pan and the reluctant amount of respect (mostly born from sheer disbelief) that the demigod had gained by surviving that long, despite any and all reasonable expectations, were both burnt into ashes when he actually acquiesced to Abigail's wish to kill Kampê. Fucking Kampê.

Because it wasn't enough that the improvised plan went to shit, no, Icarus escalated, like he always fucking did, and decided to fight Kampê. Kampê. That was just so out of line that words failed the satyr.

That's was so much beyond insane that it wasn't even funny. Over the top, outrageous, preposterous. You name it. It was bullshit.

Admittedly, the situation they had stumbled upon during the fight against Kampê made it difficult to consider anything beyond the general scope of 'fuck-this-shit-I'm-out', but Icarus had casually disregarded whatever collateral damage if it could ensure victory. Which wasn't a behavior that *anyone* wanted a demigod to have. It was bad enough when said demigod casually strolled across the world not giving a flying fuck about the gods, but actively bringing ruin upon unsuspecting mortals stank a bit too much of what the Olympians were like at the times of ancient Greece, and nobody was eager to see a return of those times.

And Charles should have gotten used to it by now, shouldn't he? Because guess the fucking what? Icarus fucking succeeded.

Sure, San Francisco just felt its Sixth Great Fire, and Coit Memorial Tower, which was dedicated to the volunteer firemen who had died in San Francisco's five major fires, ironically went up in flames. Charles grimaced when his eyes landed upon the dead oak that had fought valiantly against Kampê, before his orbs outright misted over when he observed the damage to the park, shadowed by pillars of smoke so thick that they choked the sky.

*He did it.* The thought still rang disbelievingly inside of the satyr's head as he moved closer to the demigods.

Abigail had called for her father just as Icarus squeezed whatever amount of juice he had left in order to kill Kampê, and Charles had managed to clearly see Apollo himself lend his power to his daughter's last arrow, which impacted against the back of the monster's head just as the Adamas' Captain struck at the face.

Just as Kampê turned into golden dust, leaving behind her two terrible scimitars and a pauldron of sorts with everchanging heads of snarling predators, Briares had started crying, laughing, and a combination of other things that he accomplished only because of his 50 faces, Mera, for once too tired to insult the satyr, had just laid down, deciding that sleep was the best way to digest the insanity of the last hours. *Not that she's wrong. I'd take a nap myself.*

Apollo had apparently carried his daughter to the bottom of the tower in order to avoid her going up in flames along with the Memorial, and he had walked towards the other downed demigod with a pair of aviator's Rai-Ban hiding his eyes from the sight. For an instant, Charles feared that the Sun God would kill Icarus. Gods knew Icarus had actually done more than enough to deserve it, but Apollo had already blatantly and openly broken Olympus' Law that forbade him from interfering with his offspring, what was the life of another demigod taken? Like a flower plucked from a field.

Instead, the god had simply slid the demigod away from his downed horse and placed his hand over one side of the mortal's head, and now Charles knew why: a deep gnash, likely caused by one of the barbs present on Kampê' skin crossed diagonally from almost the center of Icarus head to the middle of his jawline, joined by another, smaller one, that ran parallel from the center of his cheek to the end of the demigod's jaw.

Where there had once been an eye, there was now only scarred tissue, even if it looked more like Apollo had simply cauterized the wound than anything else. *Whatever, I'll take it.* Charles thought as he unlatched the ruined helmet from Icarus' head.

"By Hades." Charles muttered as he simply looked him over, not finding any more injuries, before he squeezed some ambrosia down the demigod's throat, sighing in relief when he unconsciously swallowed. *Apollo must have healed him. But why?*

Deciding that he had done what he could for the insane demigod, Charles moved over Briares, who had retrieved Abigail from the foot of the burning tower.

"I owe a debt that I shall repay." Briares swore solemnly when the satyr was close enough.

"You should talk with Icarus about that."

"He told me he has a safe island in the Sea, but I sensed he wished for help in defending it. I shall." the rumbling multitude of voices didn't manage to drown the countless smiles that beamed from the Hundred-Handed One' faces.

"Of course he did." Charles found himself scoffing as he looked over Abigail, who simply looked to have burnt the fingertips that held the bowstring for her last arrow. *A bit pale, but she'll live. They're fucking hardy, these demigods, aren't they?*

As he squeezed some ambrosia down the demigoddess' throat, very much as he had done for Icarus, he found himself forced to take back his wineskin, lest Abigail drank too much: "Well, at least you're awake."

"He is already tired of wandering under an exhausted sky

for that kingdom overlooking the West, threatened by Time," Abigail started singing, drunk on exhaustion and ambrosia, while she stared unseeingly into the quickly darkening ruined park.

"and of land he's had enough, not so of sails and prow,

because he's found a road of stars in the sky of his soul." she giggled when Charles worriedly shook her a bit, her eyes blinking open revealing white pupils to the satyr, who gasped in distress.

"He now can't fail again, he'll discover a new world;

the waiting makes him afraid he'll hit rock bottom." she went completely off-key with that verse, but she seemed too out of it to care as the fire of the burning city lit her features in an inhuman way, the scream of the sirens and terrified people drowned out by her lyrics.

"He doesn't lack the courage or the strength to live that madness

and even without a crew, even if it were a mirage, he shall sail." as the last word of the improvised song, she giggled again, falling back into unconsciousness only to be caught by Briares, who looked down worriedly.

Charles was about to comment on that when the wind whipped through the ruined park, ashes scattering and leaves rustling, singing a wholly different tune of freedom and

untouched lands. Of prey and predator, of crisp air and freezing waters, of primeval forests and the unstoppable weight of landslides.

"Can you carry them and the spoils?" Charles felt himself ask Briares even as he stalked across the park, following the Call.

Briares shrugged with a rippling movement that made him look like he was bubbling, before he dedicated his multitude of arms to lifting Abigail, Icarus, Mera, and the leathery pauldron with everchanging and ever-snarling beasts. He hesitated when he spotted the twin poisonous scimitars that oozed death on the ground, but he compromised by sticking them both into a random boulder, *a là* Excalibur, and lifting the rock instead of touching the weapons. Lifting for last the heavily battered naginata of the son of Hecate, the Hundred-Handed One walked behind the satyr, who seemed to have found back his strength tenfold despite the exhausting day.

With the strange song of Abigail still resounding in his ears and the Call of the Wild urging him forward, Charles touched a tiny scratch, and it became a Greek Δ, which immediately shone. As the mark of Daedalus glowed blue, the stone wall ground open.

Charles was fucking tired of Icarus' bullshit, but Gods bless him, he had his hand so far up Tyche's ass that he used her like a fucking puppet. *And I had stopped swearing too before this accursed travel. Fantastic!* He sarcastically quipped to himself, *Once returned at Camp I'll have to sit through another of those insipid seminaries in which I'm repeatedly told about the appropriate behavior...*

But he heard again the call of the Wild, and as he entered the Labirynt, he distractedly thought that returning to Camp wasn't the obligatory epilogue that he had once envisioned for this venture.

AN

**Yeah, I couldn't leave you hanging that much, could I? So yeah, Abigail is blind, Icarus lost an eye, but they're alive. I've actually tossed a dice to determine the fate of Abigail, and there wasn't an option in which she left the fight smelling like roses, so that's some hardcore meta-writing survival right there.**

**Briares was the most loyal to Zeus when the gods attempted to usurp him, and that was because the Sky God had been the one to free him from Kampe dearest. Now Icarus enjoys the same blanket loyalty. Cool, uh?**

## Chapter 22: Reboot

### Reboot

The vast hall where the Olympian Council sat developed around a firepit that was being tended to by Hestia herself, the columns in white marble seemed to surround the Thrones with a presence that was at once heavier and more delicate than what should have been possible. To the Gods sitting inside, the sight was nothing new.

Mortals and those that weren't welcome to the Council would only see walls where in truth there were none, and couldn't listen in, no matter what sort of power the immortals were capable to bring to bear. Far over the heads of the Twelve, the sky spun with precision and elegance, reminding everyone of the King's Rule.

Dionysus saw nothing of the beautiful marble around him. Didn't relish in the tacky display of power of his father and found meaningless the showmanship of his fellow Gods, that seemed to wish to make themselves seem more than the squabbling gaggle of idiots that they'd been for the past couple of millennia. From Poseidon, that appeared in a rumbling flash of seaspray, carrying with it the distant rumble of titanic waves crashing against the shore, to Ares, who instead strode in, hate and fury and bloodlust resting over his shoulders like a mantle.

The God of Ritual Madness might have ruled over the Theatre, but performances were meant for an audience, and among the Twelve, there wasn't a single god that came to the Council to Learn, to be Awed, or to Feel what their lives couldn't give them. He barely withheld a snort, drinking the meaningless diet coke that he had manifested a while before.

An earth-shattering thunder introduced the last to join the council, and with the flash of white lightning, the youngest son of Kronos appeared on his Throne, which seemed fashioned out of a cumulonimbus, grey with rain and promising storms.

Dionysus ignored the rituals designed to reestablish that Zeus was, in fact, the King and that he could have done anything on his own far better than anyone else could, because he was the best, *yadda yadda yadda*, and reminding them of that fact (or empty boast) seemed to be one of the main reasons for the very existence of the Council.

The God of Ritual Madness let the meaningless words of his fellow Gods wash over him with disinterest, preferring to stare into the fire at the center of the Council, hoping to catch in the flame an echo of the events of the Adama. He felt, from time to time, the warmth trickling down from the Tyrsus he had gifted to Icarus, but while Dionysus luxuriated in the feeling at any given opportunity, that didn't allow him to know *everything* that was going on.

Hestia, noticing his attention on *her* flames, raised an amused eyebrow in his direction, and *pulled*, allowing him a glance from the brazier lit with one of her embers: Solid Stone, Wild Plants, Quiet Waves, and a general feeling of tired restlessness, coupled with a feeling of conquest that he immediately recognized.

"I like them!" Ares thundered, catching Dionysus' attention, as it was obvious just who he was referring to.

"They're out of control." Athena quietly spoke, tilting her head towards her father while she tilted her shoulders *just enough* to be subtly dismissive of the God of War, "At the very least we should remove Icarus, he's quickly following in the footsteps of his namesake, but this time he dragged a group of demigods with him."

"The point of Demigods wasn't to challenge everything and everyone?" Hermes rose from his seat, his eyes blazing with endless stretches of road and the promise of communication, "Don't we keep having demigods so that we're not forgotten? Why aren't we honoring those that killed the Hydra, those that escaped Circe, those that ended those uncivilized cannibals?"

"Sit!" actual thunder rippled across the Council, forcing Dionysus himself to sit a tad bit straighter in his seat, if only because he would be able to better enjoy the Spanish Telenovela that his 'family' actually was.

"We all know that Icarus doesn't act in order to honor us." Athena's voice was implacable as her grey eyes, that denied any concession in front of her merciless logic: "In fact, more often than not he does the opposite."

Ares laughed while he clapped loudly, knowingly covering the voice of his half-sister with his booming voice: "Where was this coldness when you praised the way they slowly but surely chipped away at the Laestrygonians? "

"That was before Icarus killed Kampê." Hera spoke calmly, with all the grace and control that she could exercise as the Queen, "And even before, the little bastard should have been put down."

A muted rumble seemed to echo within the clouds that shaped her husband's throne, but the King chose not to speak against her in this particular circumstance.

"Nonetheless, it was a magnificent Hunt." Artemis spoke with barely restrained glee: "Acting as the prey only to set up an ambush."

Taking a slightly longer sip of his diet-coke was the only thing Dionysus could do to stop himself from laughing: for all of her inherent wisdom and political-savvyness, Hera far too often forgot that there were many bastards seating at the Council, and that her casual contempt did more to keep the Olympians from killing Icarus than anything the mortal had actually accomplished on his own.

"He travels the Labyrinth with almost casual ease, does he not?" Athena returned to the fray with yet another of her arguments in favour of killing the demigod captain of the Adamas, her tone as glacial as ever, "Why, he came out with flaming horses and

managed to free Briares, that we thought long lost. Now he has a powerful ally, and there are whispers that he wishes to built an actual city on the island he conquered."

"I bet it burns that he didn't even think to ask the goddess of architecture for help." Dionysus spoke for the first time since the beginning of the meeting, delighting in seeing his half-sister's mask crack just enough to earn himself a glare: "Or any of us, truly. But for now it is only an idea, when there'll be an actual city, then we can speak about Patrons, trying to avoid the mess that was Athens."

"But why does Apollo not speak?" Hera questioned, her voice almost mocking in her usual scorn, "Isn't he the one that broke the Rules and openly took part of the Quest? Isn't he the one that blatantly lent his power to his daughter, and then failed to claim the demigods' lives on site? Why, he even healed them. Isn't he the reason why this extraordinary council has been called?"

"I did what I had to." Apollo stiffly replied, but a frown was clear to see upon his face, betraying his unease at his own actions. Being the God of Truth didn't allow him to conceal too much, very much like the Sun, he *shone*, and while he may be unwilling to share his deepest reasonings, his actions spoke just as loudly as dawn's light, and *that*, brought Dionysus to sit a tad straighter on his throne, purple eyes gleaming with interest. After all, Apollo almost never acted cagey.

"Instead of healing his eye, you made sure he couldn't be regrown." Poseidon too deigned to speak for the first time, the approximation of a grin on his face while he studied the Sun God: "I've taken my share of souls because they refused to pay tribute before setting out, and I've no qualms as long as he remains on dry land."

"It won't last." Apollo turned his head towards the God of the Seas: "This much I can tell, the Adamas is tied to his Fate."

Just as an heavy frown appeared on the features of Poseidon, an eardrum-rupturing chain of thunders brought everyone to silence before the council could fall into the chaotic mess it usually became, and Zeus spoke.

"Many here have interests in the travels of this demigod." he rose from his cloudy-throne, lightning blazing in his eyes as he took in the form of each Olympian: "Some gave him an addicitional task," his eyes landed on Artemis, who had the decency of look away almost immediately, "others feel slighted," he directed his attention to Athena, who stared blanly in front of herself, "and some support him almost openly."

Dionysus let a wide smile stretch over his face, not bothering denying it even as Ares commented: "When was the last time that demigods partecipated in a proper raid?"

"Only because they don't travel on my Roads, it doesn't mean that they do not travel. Demigods have been sitting still for far too many decades, running meaningless errands for anyone of us."



"When on a Quest for a god, the Heroes must act without open intervention from any divinity, lest this very council is torn apart by fleeting loyalties." Zeus' voice boomed again, his head turning this and that way even as he gestured with grandiose movements: "Icarus brought together a large group of the oldest demigods, and headed out without Prophecy to guide them, openly spitting in our faces. And yet, he braved the Sea of Monsters, he didn't leave Athena's daughter to her own devices despite the child's folly, and he led his people against many perils."

"We will not smite him. But neither we will openly help him ever again." Zeus declared, and with that, everybody could feel the weight of his Rule settle in the Council Room like an heavy cloud: "Officially, Icarus isn't on a Quest, and everybody could have intervened, openly or not. The lack of a Prophecy means that we could have muddled with his Fate with no consequences, but it is clear that expecting some form of responsibility out of any of you was too much to ask. So I now declare that we will act as if he's under the protection of a Prophecy."

Apollo's sigh was the only sigh that of his relief.

The message that everybody could hear however, wasn't a novelty for any stretch of the measure: *He's going to save my daughter, I am the Law, and so you'll leave him alone.*

Dionysus couldn't hold back a quiet scoff: nepotism had always disgusted him.

Far away from Olympus, in the metaphysical opposite of the Empire State Building, there was a plateau atop of a mountain, and it was as quiet as it always was during the night, letting in the faint music of the nearby Garden, while an echo of the winds that carried news to those that were able to listen.

Bent but not broken under the weight of the Sky, Atlas tilted his head towards the daughters that no longer walked among the living, remaining instead as eternal mementoes in the celestail spheres.

Then another sound made itself known: steps, crushing the gravel with a constant pace that not many could keep on that kind of terrain, and a presence he was more than simply familiar with.

"Prometheus." he greeted the fellow Titan, his voice guarded as to not give away his thoughts, that, from the Fire-Giver's smile, were all too obvious.

"I've met a curious someone recently." Prometheus smiled while his eyes landed briefly on the celestial-bronze machine that rested not far from the Sky-Bearer: "Someone that I bet you're familiar with."

"So he's alive."

"Quite." Prometheus' smile was just a bit too wide to actually reassure Atlas, but the titan didn't let that deter him, and a matching showing of teeth appeared on his face.

"He freed you." the Sky-Bearer stated with certainty: "In exchange of what, I wonder?"

"Well, I tricked one of his people into freeing me, but the old hags weren't too appreciative of that, so instead of a vulture, I had Laestrygonians eating my guts every day."

A rumbling laughter was Atlas' answer to that unexpected bit of information: "Ah, so that war actually happened. I thought the Hours were telling tall stories."

"Genocide." Prometheus nodded with an ecstatic smile: "Only because they were in the way, only because he *could*. He's not like your ordinary Olympian' lapdog."

"That much I already knew." Atlas' smile slowly disappeared, his shoulders shifting minutely in order to bring some attempted relief to his back, without much success: "Why are you here, brother?"

"The previous King is starting to move, and something tells me that the both of us have different ideas, after all, he's never been one to share power." Prometheus let himself rest on his back, his eyes peering in the starlit sky: "And something tells me that with time, your fellow Sky-Bearer can be... thought."

"You won't manage to make a puppet out of him, not for yourself and not for *someone* else." Atlas chuckled even if it made the Sky press uncomfortably against his shoulders: "I've seen his willfulness, it is not something that can be directed by lies."

At that, Prometheus inched forward: "Who said anything about lies? The only necessity is to get him involved, he'll do the rest. As you've said, he's willful enough."

Atlas tilted his head towards Prometheus, a faint gleam shining deep into his eyes: "What did you have in mind?"

## **ICARUS POV**

My senses trickled back into working gear separately, like waves on the sand, each carrying with it a different taste of the world that I knew was just beyond the reach of my conscious. Even in the depths beyond the waking world, there was nothing. No dreams, no colors, not even music summoned from memory. Just... quiet, heavy as a lead curtain, silence, cold as wind that stole the breath, and... dullness.

In the dark, with sounds muffled beyond any hope of me recognizing them, with smells too faint to be associated with anything, and with my touch reporting the odd feeling of falling upwards, I felt... strained.

It wasn't the hurt that comes after a good workout, nor the limb-shattering weight of true exhaustion, it wasn't even the weariness that I could recall from my stint under the sky. No, it was a persistent feeling of being... *fragile*. I felt like a thin sheet of paper and a wrinkled one at that.

Slowly, I came to recognize a relatively regular movement, and through breathing, I discovered that I had a chest. From there, even with my eyes closed, my wary feeling of myself spread, and tentatively, slowly growing accustomed to the unfamiliar and unwelcome weakness that seemed to characterize my sense of self, I started attempting to move, my mind far too muddled to focus on anything beyond the immediate, instinctive need of becoming once more aware owner of my body.

I felt what I knew were my muscles strain to the limit only to allow me the barest movement of my arms. And instead of pushing myself even further, I took a deep breath, letting my mind roam over the waves of discomfort that made me feel like my skin was too tight, my bones tilted wrongly, my ligaments pulling at the wrong times.

"You're cracked open boy," a man's voice stated, "yes, I know you're awake, and you're pouring outwards... you're dying."

*What?*

My mind returned to Janus words, recalling his twin, dissonant laugh even as I ran from Kampê, before I focused once more on the sounds coming from around me. Once again, I forced myself to ignore the discomfort that the awareness of my own ears gave me, and I heard myself breathing.

Slowly, as if my eyelids were lifting mountains, I blinked, revealing a blurry world that did not match any expectation that I had of it. *Wait...* I blinked again, and half of my vision remained black. With a painstakingly slow movement, I managed to carry a hand over my face, where I tentatively became aware of scar tissue that went from my forehead to my jaw.

"Don't touch it." the flat voice, carrying the tone of an experienced healer, brought the rest of my attention once more to my surroundings, and blinking furiously, I brought into focus the only other person that I could spot in my immediate surroundings.

The man was in his fifties, with grey hair and grey eyes that shone like steel in the well-lit circular room. I looked him over briefly, easily recognizing his presence as a warrior's one: "Who are you?"

"Name's Quintus." he replied gruffly. *Dedalus? What the fuck?*

The revelation managed to completely awake me, and my eyes briefly took in the rest of the circular room, included the bed upon which I was resting. It looked like any random

hospital's room, despite it being circular, and obviously, it having a grey maned warrior instead of a doctor in a lab coat.

"Icarus." I introduced myself, slowly taking stock of my body. While the feeling of weakness persisted, I was in control. My toes followed my will, and I managed to scratch distractedly around my scar tissue, carefully avoiding the actual scar: "Can I have some ambrosia? It will help."

"What?" the man's voice expressed only disbelief.

"Ambrosia will set me straight." I failed at shrugging, but from the frown of Quintus, I could tell that he managed to spot my action, and he was far from pleased.

"Didn't you hear boy? You're cracked open. No ambrosia, no nectar, your body is as frail as a mortal's right now. Worse, even."

*Oh, yeah, I forgot...* I forced my focus to return to the man in front of me: "My injuries?"

"The ones that anyone can see are cosmetical." the healer shrugged, "but your psychí, your soul... it's a mess, like a violin string."

I liked my lips, not knowing if I could trust this guy. *Then again, he just healed me, or I can simply not say it outright...* "Once I managed to get my hands on Golden Apples from the Queen's garden, if I succeeded in retrieving another..."

"Leaving alone the fact that as you are now, you couldn't steal candy from a child, never mind Ladon, how in the Hades should I know? I've never seen a Golden Apple." the man gestured wildly around himself: "But if I were to make a guess, I'd say that pouring more water into a cracked glass is a recipe for disaster."

I grimaced, hearing the words that shot down my immediate theory. Then again, it made some sort of sense: whatever a Golden Apple did, it wasn't something to be consumed willy-nilly.

"I'm sending you the satyr, you've got shit to talk about I suppose."

"Wait." I slowly raised a hand, which he grasped with an arched eyebrow: "Thank you."

Dedalus-in-disguise snorted: "You'd think I had a fucking choice."

I was left looking at the quickly retreating back of the man, which made me frown as I slowly rebuild my last moments of consciousness. I wasn't overly worried about the others, the only ones near Kampê had been myself and Mera, which was by far more fast than me when it came to hightailing the fuck away from danger.

"A freak downpour helped to quench the Sixth Great fire of San Francisco, congratulations, you killed more mortals in a single swoop than any demigod since

Hitler." Charles snorted derisively in my direction, as soon as he walked in, "But you can try to beat his record once you're better, eh?"

Before I could start to even make sense of his accusation, he clamped a hand on my left shoulder: "And before finding this shifty-looking guy, we met Pan."

The new jarred me greatly, and my eyes... eye, singular, bored into his seeking confirmation for his words, what I saw was a mixture of sadness and relief that I quickly linked to my metaknowledge: "Is he...?"

Charles nodded heavily: "Pan is dead."

**AN**

**Boom! Dedalus fucking yeah! It stands to reason that the wounds on Icarus, which included but were not limited to the 'tearing himself apart' with the I am Free, can be dealt with by Dedalus, who has been body-hopping for more than a couple of millennia.**

**Yeah, I've skipped the interaction with Pan. I did so for several reasons, one: there are only that many ways in which I can dress up an event that everybody knows about. And two: since Icarus isn't really invested in Nature (he didn't bat an eye at Geryon's treatment of the animals) I felt that there weren't impellent reasons for having him interact with the God of the Wild.**

**Besides, even after the build-up that has been the fight against Kampe, I don't want to lose momentum, so this chapter is more up to the speed I want to keep. Even the eventual fight against Polyphemus will be underwhelming after Kampe. The problem when you bring out the big guns is that you need to give reasons while the new enemy isn't curb-stomped. I have a little nerfing because of the state of Icarus, who is being torn apart by his name, but there is only so much that I can accomplish.**

**And yeah, Apollo's help came out of left field, but, while I usually prefer to give you readers the same mushroom treatment that Icarus gets, making it up to you to guess possible reasons why the god of the Sun helped, I opted for some little foreshadowing.**

**In any case, Kampe isn't something that can be killed through plot armor people. Admittedly, Icarus&co would have failed without Apollo, but what's to say that Briares wouldn't have snapped out of it seeing his saviors fall?**

**Chapter 23: Still Sailing**

## Still Sailing

"Yes, I can build working eyes." Quintus admitted to the scarily insightful demigod that had stumbled out of his room while leaning heavily on the satyr's shoulder, "But I'll require time, and payment, and..."

"Grab your stuff, you're coming with us." the recently one-eyed demigod spoke faintly, knowing that the equivalent of the faintest breeze could be enough to completely shatter him, but even then, sweaty and heaving with fatigue, there was a certainty in his voice, a heaviness about his words, that piqued Quintus' interest, now more than before.

"I'm sorry?" Quintus blinked, stepping back in the large room that was his principal workshop in the Labirynth, his shoulders slowly tensing as if in preparation for conflict.

Strangely enough, the demigod seemed only to be amused by the swordsman's reaction, his lone eye darting immediately towards the asleep form of the daughter of Apollo, one whose sight had been burned away by unrestrained divinity, only to rest over the asleep and vast form of Briares, which seemed to be impossibly fit in a niche of the workshop, countless hands gently petting a horse.

"You're coming with us back to the island." the demigod tiredly repeated while the satyr slowered him into a chair, sliding a plate full of food close to him, "We both know that the most interesting things are happening around me right now, and it will be so for a while still. Besides, we have an entire island to set up as both safe harbor and city on the edge between physical and metaphysical."

Quintus was unsettled by recent events, so it was perhaps understandable why he didn't immediately burst in helpless laughter when the half-dead demigod spoke expecting to be obeyed. *I was never one to follow orders.* The old swordsman-architect-painter-whatever-struck-his-fancy took a deep breath to calm down and took a step back from his instinctive reaction.

On one hand, he could say 'No' and keep going as he had in the course of millennia, on the other... Surely the life of *this* particular demigod was undoubtedly extremely interesting. And if Quintus had managed to read correctly between the lines, going back to this Icarus' island meant being able to work with Briares himself. Not something that happened very often. In fact, it was something more unique than rare, an opportunity that would have left man people mouth watering with desire, even those that lacked the inventor' intimate understanding of the world.

The appearance of this particular group of demigods... that on itself was worryingly growing to be more unique than rare with the passing of the centuries, finding the same people wearing different faces, slowly but surely cutting off any interest whatsoever that the old swordsman could have for mankind. These demigods... this Icarus... *What were*

*the chances that a demigod named Icarus, of all people, would fall on my lap, asking for help?*

The recently one-eyed demigod had dressed up his request for support, for sure, he even gave his offer a veneer of respectability, proposing it as if it was *Icarus* the one giving more than what he was going to receive if Quintus joined his group. Cunning in a way, unafraid of keep reaching for more.

Quintus sighed as he studied the group of demigods. It had been a long time since the last time he had been so interested in someone, there was no denying that much.

Oh, sure, humans were devilishly clever as they had always been, in particular after the last time a demigod had freed Prometheus, letting him roaming long enough for the Industrial Revolution to come to bear. Truly, it had been amazing to witness, from a distance of course, the series of events that brought mankind from the tribe-mentality that still somewhat ruled even over large kingdoms, whose leaders saw the world in a us-versus-them tint, to the world that now seemed to be spinning faster and faster under the push of globalization.

The marvels of technology and science kept growing at a more or less steady pace, booming constantly since the World Wide Web began, allowing more or less freely accessible knowledge, which was, to date, the only thing that grew the more it was given freely.

And yet, even if civilization now was very much a giant looking at nature with spite and at the unknown with challenge, old things had remained, for mankind still believed, somewhere, somewhat, that something that could not be explained existed, leaving an opening for those pesky and horrible gods to keep playing their games.

Halfblood Camp was hardly a genius idea, and yet it managed to both concentrate and limit the influences of the metaphysical on regular mortals, and for that, Quintus was reluctantly appreciative of the initiative, even if it tended to shape self-righteous idiots that fought for a status quo that would one day inevitably fall.

It had been a touch and go situation with the World Wars, in Quintus' opinion, with different pantheons coming dangerously close to openly interact one with another, even while each religion was at war with itself, demigod against demigod, legacy against legacy. Oh, the millennia old swordsman couldn't take direct part in that particular aspect of the conflict, no more than water could interact with oil, like all the others that shared his particular brand of existence.

*Even if not quite as peculiar as mine.* He huffed in amusement as he finally managed to relax his shoulders, the reassuring presence of Mrs. O'Leary smooth in his shadow. Maybe it was his name? But no, surely, it wasn't enough for a demigod to be named Icarus to hold his interest, he hardly was the first. *Even if...*

And yet, for all of his appreciation of the vast strides of science of the last few decades, a trend that promised to only grow more and more, Quintus couldn't shake the feeling that mankind had lost something along the way. It wasn't Faith, for many still believed, if only distractedly, in something, it wasn't ambition, mankind couldn't abandon it any more than Pandora could undo her actions. But... the time of Legends was coming to an end. At least, the kind that remained as a ever-bright light in the shred memories of humanity.

There had been many Great Men, heroes, to be sure, heroes that fought with words and swords and hopes and actions and suffering and dreams, but Tragedy intrinsically part of the Heroes, which was there to teach the world as any great deed on itself, was simply... dying. Where were the Achilles and the Aeneas? Where were the wishes and plans to build another Babel? Why no mortal had triumphed where the demigods were thought to bow and kneel?

Quintus had readily accepted this stillicide, recognizing that it was unavoidable even for those that still hunted him, and that thought had once given him a strange, cathartic comfort.

And yet, the buried part of Quintus that had once been Dedalus, Greatest Builder and Keenest Artist, had recently stirred with the tide of events that he managed to follow.

No longer to repeat past deeds with less luster and purpose, a demigod was on the rise. One whose origin wasn't quite as clear cut as it seemed. One that deliberately waited in order to surpass Heracles, only because he could. One that dragged others in his wake, to defy and attempt, to roam and thunder across the world, only because he wished to.

Oh, the stories were many already, and varied, already growing larger than what they had been, and yet, and yet... His name was Icarus.

Which were the odds? To be wounded by the Sun once again, because he kept pushing towards the impossible... Fate was strangely ironic when it came to conclusions. Quintus knew, with the stark clarity born by millennia of experience, that there was little he could do besides accepting his role in these young demigods' tale.

When the occasion appeared to meet the demigod and some of his most trusted, along with Briares, of all beings, the choice to making himself present had been a no-brainer, only too late he realized that he had been once more only a piece on the board.

Quintus, even with his fading wonder and interest for what was left of the world, had learned more about them with a single glance than he had in the past decade about anything else.

To slay that particular child of Tartarus, to save Briares, oh... wounded or not, this demigod was special. Not that much for his abilities, his predilection for the Mist was easy to read, and hardly of any interest, no, but his choices, which seemed simply insane once you stopped to consider them, were... *new*.



However, instead of being the one to find them, apparently the satyr, which was the only one of the group still standing besides Briares, had found Pan, who *gave directions*, among other things, Quintus was sure, in order to give the demigods a chance to survive.

Curiosity had long been the only thing that kept Quintus going, along with Dedalus' last refusal of death, his Masterpiece: denying Atropos the right to cut his thread.

Curiosity once more reared its head in Quintus' soul, making itself known and demanding to be recognized. And from the crooked smile that the almost dead demigod gave him, it appeared that he knew too.

*Who are you, really?* Dedalus remembered his few meetings with actual gods, even when under the guise of one of his bodies in the millennia following his escape in the Labirynth, and there was an air about them if one had the sense to perceive it.

With his cracked up soul, this one-eyed young man was no god, it was obvious, and yet he was no common demigod either.

"I'll need to hear the story about Pan, you know, or at least be there when you retell it to She of the Wild." Icarus then turned his attention back to the satyr, who snorted at the nochalance of the demigod.

Quintus blinked, perplexed: "Who said anything about coming with you?" there were a *lot* of reasons to steer clear of this particular demigod, the particular brand of bullshittery of his life was the main one, and yet...

Icarus' remaining eye returned to stare down at Quintus once more: "You already decided."

Dedalus was surprised to feel laughter escape his lips, and turned in order to pack up most of what he could reasonably transport, an infamous song spilling from his lips: "The Times They're A-Changing..."

Charles was... overwhelmed.

The series of events that he had bore witness for, and in which he had actively participated, had been a wild ride, more than anything that the experienced Seeker had ever seen. Or even heard about, truly.

The world had firstly tilted on its axis when Icarus delivered his brief speech about raiding Circe, it was something stright out of the old legends, madness and impossibility that managed to grow off each other until they shone like the very sun.

Outwitting an immortal whose speciality was magic, which required a certain guile... that had been awe inspiring.

His words about Pan, delivered while he was wrestling a carnivore horse... they stung, like sand under the fingernails, or a sudden shiver down his spine.

And then, obviously, freeing Briares, only to decide to actually kill the daughter of Tartarus.

All of that was a simple frame for that Hope that he had always prayed and acted for: Pan. The True Lord of the Wild. And he was dead.

*True Wild is no more in this world of men.*

The words had echoed like rocks hooked to his navel, only to be followed by defeated hopes.

*Save what little is left, the primaeval forests, the reef that hasn't been preyed upon yet, those beasts that keep going even when they are of no use to the mortals.*

And worse still, his final command.

*Tell everyone. Bring them my last words, knowing that this course of action cannot be turned away. The Green will survive by mercy of mankind, not in spite of their strength. They'll need to chose to preserve, but the very definition of Wild implies that it exists without any sort of concession from anyone, be they mortal or gods.*

Charles had kept going only because Briares had urged him gently, his curiously incongruous mind retaining only few details of what had been said when Pan first laid eyes on Icarus and Abigail: "*Only one has an hope to be on your side within the Labyrinth. Follow that path, and you'll reach him.*"

Mera had recovered aplenty under the competent care of the eclectic Quintus, who had dismantled everything from his workshop, leaving it in the vast hands of Briares to carry, while Icarus rode his steed, holding in his arms a still insensate Abigail, whose blank pupils bore endlessly into nothingness.

The strangely competent man that they found, who answered to the name of Quintus, had taken to the healing of their party with surprisingly little resistance. And it was somewhat disquieting the ease through which he walked the endlessly twisting Labyrinth, the half smirk he delivered when he spotted the compass Icarus had David build under Prometheus' guidance exactly with the purpose of finding a safe return.

Oh, sure there was the occasional thing skittering in the dark, the faint roar of something else trying to warn off the wanderers, but the simple presence of Briares was deterrent enough. No strange two-faced gods, no traps, no holes towards Tartarus: the return was smooth as if the Labyrinth itself worked to have them return to the island.

Even if the last stretch of travel was quite lackluster, Charles let out a heavy breath of relief once they left the Labyrinth behind, once more walking the known land they had conquered from the Laestrygonians.

The first great difference hit you with your first breath: the stench of war and of Laestrygonians had finally abated completely, leaving room for the dry presence budding wheat growing on terraces, for ripe grapes and a mediterranean mixture of both fruits and vegetables that seemed to thrive on the island.

Breathtaking was the sky, of a blue so clear and uncompromising that it appeared fake, while tall cliffs surrounding almost completely the Bay stood quietly even if the wind rippled over the terraces and stretches of jungle, making the plants wave like a green, vertical sea. On the plateau that hosted the entrance to the Labyrinth, the Laestrygonians' buildings had been long since destroyed, leaving room for some stone structures arranged defensively, proof of David's first attempts to build fortifications.

While the waves that crashed on the outside of the island were undoubtedly loud, the ones of the bay seemed almost kind, gently moving under the wooden pier that led to the Adamas, seemingly singing with the rustling of the stretches of wild forest.

All in all, considering the perils and the challenges the Adamas overcame to reach this point, the island was quite the prize.

"C'mon, I can't believe that you have no ideas for the name of the city." Quintus spoke suddenly, turning towards Icarus while the members of the Adamas realized who had returned.

"I do." the recently one-eyed man honestly replied, "But until we're actually enough to build and maintain the city, I'll keep the name to myself. Besides, we still need some gods squarely in our corner, I don't want betrayals later down the line.

"You think we can finally name the island?" Charles asked, tired of referring to the place as 'island' in his own head, but eager to hear Icarus' decision.

"Katáktisi." the demigod grinned faintly from atop of his steed, Abigal's head lolling weakly against his shoulders, "Or Conquest, if you prefer english. But I think I'd prefer to keep things simple."

## **ICARUS POV**

28 August, 2002

The night was quiet and almost without wind, but even so, the gentle breeze everpresent in the bay sang with purpose among the countless branches of the forest, while laughter and the cracking of fire seemed to be louder than it should have.

I gingerly touched the bandages that covered my missing eye, carefully prodding at the little machine that Dedalus had built inside my otherwise empty eye orbit. It felt odd, and we wouldn't know if it actually worked for a few days still, but it made me smile nevertheless. If this was the only thing I had to pay for killing the daughter of Tartarus...

Then the pain came.

Sudden and without direction, it made me shudder with its intensity. It was deep and sharp, almost as if all the wounds that I had suffered in the past years had flared to new life, ignoring the fact that I had healed since then.

I stumbled, falling to one knee as the breath was forcefully driven out of my lungs. My spine felt almost as if it was being crushed once more under the sky, an unforgiving hole in my side brought a coppery taste in my mouth while my whole body spasmed.

I gritted my teeth and remained still, waves of fire scouring my nerves, until, as sudden as it had come, it vanished.

I was left breathing heavily on the ground, my hands barely catching me before my face bit the dust, covered in cold sweat and almost too afraid to move.

Eventually, the shivers passed, and my body started to obey me once more. I climbed back on my feet, leaning on the short wall that limited the minute terrace in order to sit, my breath still heavy.

"Almost forgotten about this part." I grimaced, my lone eye turning towards the plaza below, where food, wine and fires framed an outrageously exaggerated welcome back party.

Quintus had accepted the situation with the stolid countenance of someone that had seen a *lot* of bullshit in his time, while Briares looked a bit overwhelmed. That didn't stop him from having half of his faces eating anything they could, while the others laughed and cried in relief for his freedom and the taste of kindness that his captor had made him forget.

Charles had already drunk himself under the table, likely trying to stop thinking about the death of Pan.

Mera was somewhere in the more plain area of the jungle, likely looking forward to hunting something.

And Abigail had been spoonfed before she fell once more in her mindless sleep.

*Does it make me an horrible person, considering my condition before the ones of my companions?* I asked myself, my hand fishing out the only prize safe to handle that the daughter of Tartarus left behind at her death.

The strange pauldron of sorts with everchanging heads of snarling predators seemed made out of a sturdy grey-ish leather, and the furious beasts that kept attempting to sink their fangs into the night itself were careful to not try to bite my fingers. *Is this because I killed the beast?* I wondered, almost donning the piece of armour.

There were no stories taht spoke of *her* defeat.

"Kampê." her name still gave me the creeps, immediately summoning the memory of unholy leathery wings, and the stench of sulphur and rot. I shivered, before placing the pauldron back on the stone wall upon which I was sitting.

"Hey, Icarus." a familiar voice spoke as its owner walked out of the shadows.

Hailey hadn't changed that much since the last time I saw her, even if the bags under her eyes had somewhat lessened, and she seemed more relaxed.

"This seems familiar." I smiled faintly at her, before returning my attention to the ongoing party below.

"Is it a bad thing?" she asked, sitting astride the small wall even while her eyes landed on Kampê's Pauldron.

"It depends, I guess." I eyed her shrewdly: the last time she had 'cornered' me while the others were busy getting drunk she had inquired about my metaknowledge, that she somewhat peered into while I was asleep. "You have news I should be concerned about?"

"I wouldn't say concerned..." she stalled, before turning her head away from me looking at the rest of the island. "Kataktsisi, uh?" she deflected, almost tasting the word on her tongue.

"Do you disapprove?" I didnt want to push her, there wasn't any rush, even if I was dying under the weight of my own name, entertaining polite conversation with a friend that I hadn't seen in a while wasn't a too large sacrifice to make.

She shook her head, shooting me a brief smile before turning her head towards the party below, the flames of the fires dancing merrily in her eyes: "It's nice to finally have a name to call this place with."

We remained in companionable silence for a couple of minutes, during which I simply breathed in the endless succession of bullshit that we had endured up to this point, mainly because of my own mad ambition. Still, even with the treath of death looming over me, foretold by Janus and confirmed by Dedalus, I didn't regret much. Oh, sure, I wished to have saved Thalia from being turned into a tree, but I wasn't sure that I could act against the Fates. My best guess was that they had left me alone since I stood clear from the main players of the prophecies to be. *On the other hand, my Fate might simply be do what the fuck I want, only to die as a memento for other upstarts.*

After a while, I looked at the demigoddess next to me: "What did you want to talk about?"

She whipped her head towards, me, as if she too was lost in her thoughts until I reminded her of her purpose here. "Well," she started, "I wanted to know how we'll split the crew going forward."

"Splitting the crew." I nodded at the thought, it would be insane to leave this island without demigods, even with Briares so eager to defend it in order to show me the same strength I displayed by saving him from his captor.

"Do you already have ideas about it?" I asked, bringing my attention squarely on the daughter of Hypno. There was more about this conversation than splitting the crew, even if she might not know it: her decisions to confront me about stuff that made her feel upset, from my 'dreams about the future', to the current situation, pointed at a big deal of personal initiative that I had yet to meet even among the others that sailed the Adamas.

Oh sure, everyone was willful enough, and got more than just a bit of spunk, but none had actually ever questioned me or my reasons. It was largely in part because my ideas were always the most outrageous on the table, and thusly challenge-inducing, but Hailey... I blinked in surprise, realizing how badly I had underestimated her. There was potential there, a lot of it.

"Well, I might have been keeping an ear to the ground, and I've casually spoke about remaining here to someone..."

"Stop beating around the bush, Hailey." I rolled my eye: "It's a good thing you've done, I'm not going to bite your head off."

"Okay, Okay... well, first would be David: he already has Jillian plans for the layout of the city-fortress, and he's needed for the stone-working and defences," at my nod, she went ahead, visibly less jittery than just a moment before, "Then there's Hannah, who's organizing the agriculture here, obviously Abigail better remain here until we made directly for Hlafblood Camp."

I turned my head down at the still ongoing party, easily spotting the blind daughter of Apollo. *Yeah, I can't imagine her being safe while we sail.*

"Not Annabeth?" I asked, returning my attention to the daughter of Hypnos, "You'd think she'd be safer here."

"Well," Hailey chagrined a bit, "she would also make everyone go insane, and everyone here would be really busy, on the Adamas is easier to give her a task that we're sure she'd be willing to follow."

"Reasonable enough." I shrugged, not caring particularly one way or another, "The others are all going to come?"

"Alexandra turned out to be good at transmuting stone into marble, and she is enjoying plowing through the stuff we raided from Circe." Hailey spoke easily.

"And she had a crush on Abigail before we went away." I concluded, my eye remaining trailed on the demigoddess in question, who looked heartbroken at seeing the mindless state of our favourite healer.

"How did you...?"

"Lucky guess." to be frank, it was good that the daughter of Aphrodite was somewhat interested in Abigail. It would both keep her from losing herself into the not-at-all-safe magic that she was studying and Abigail would have someone to keep a constant eye on her.

"Briares is also staying." I changed topic, "Besides the obviously great defensive measure he represents, he can help David."

"I've read the chronicles we brought with us while we were waiting for you to heal at the Hydra's island." Hailey rolled her eyes, "It's thanks to him that the Olympians didn't bind their King after the Titanomachy, isn't it true?"

"It's true." I grinned, hunching towards her to whisper the rest: "The King's lighting bolt was created for him by the First Three Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires in Tartaros, in conjunction with a certain Trident and Helm of Darkness to defeat the Titans."

"Holy shit!"

"Indeed." I smirked, "I don't know about Quintus, he's a jack of all traders, and a master of many, I'd think he'd be more useful here than with us."

"Returning to the topic of Abigail?" Hailey started, inching forward from her seated position, worry clearly etched on her features, "I understand that this guy built you a cyborg-eye..."

"It's not a cyborg-eye..." I tried to protest, only for the daughter of Hypnos to keep talking.

"...this Quintus seems to be a blessing, why hasn't he fixed her eyes by now? You've been with him for a while..."

"Well, once we reach camp Dionysus will help her getting back on track." I sighed, stopping Hailey with a gesture of my hand while I squarely pushed the problem of dealing with Abigail's potential madness into the hands of future-me, "And her sight... we're not sure that it's the eyes."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head minutely, turning once more to observe the still ongoing festivity: "As soon as I figure it out, I'll tell you, deal?"

I was... stumped. For all of the pride I had for the undeniable results of my actions, and while I was somewhat worried about Abigail, I felt... drifting, as if any given option mattered exactly the same. Abigail had accompanied me up to this point, saved my life, and became a Slayer of Kampe at my side. Still, I didn't feel anything about leaving her behind while I pushed forward.

Almost without me realizing it, *I am free* burned faintly in the back of my mind, sending forth twin and contradicting sensations of pain and detachment.

I grimaced, once more remembering that I was running on a timer. Janus and Dedalus' words weighted heavily on me: "We sail the day after tomorrow." I simply said as I put away my stuff, slowly rising from my seated position as to not show weakness.

And if I felt a pang of guilt at leaving Hailey in the dark about my circumstances, I didn't let it stop me from walking away.

## 2 September, 2002

I led the Adamas with a gentle twist of the helm into the mouth of the river, the wind and momentum enough to counter the weak current of the course of water. My eye however, didn't focus on the geography of the island, which looked, as far as I could tell, like some kind of bucolic paradise, being made all of undulating hills and gently swaying trees under a fresh breeze that perfectly tamed the heat that the Sun imposed on the land.

My attention, even tired as I was after the rather predictable freak storm that almost sunk us, was focused on a single thing: after a few hundred of meters in the river, where the course of water was completely flat as if it was a simple mirror, countless white lotuses rested easily in the quiet of the island, promising a respite that summoned an instinctive revulsion within me.

"Once more, we're led astray..." I muttered to myself, my mind already churning through our options. While I planned, I kept guiding the Adamas against the current, soon enough finding sandy shore on one handle of the river, where I chose to stop our navigation.

The island of the Lotus Eaters wasn't a threat like others we had ever faced, only partially resembling the trick that Cire tried to pull on us: "Don't drink from the river, nobody is to touch a single Lotus, but get started on the repairs."

"What about you?" Jillian asked as she walked next to the helm, her grey eyes scrutinizing me as if I was about to disappear as soon as she looked away.



*I'm asking myself the same.* I laughed at myself. My question was very simple: we had made land in the 'more traditional' part of Circe's island, but once we raided it, we stumbled in the Resort she had built with all the amenities of modern times. *Wasn't there a Casino Lotus in Vegas? Hosting Nico and Bianca, both demigods of Hades?*

I wasn't exactly sure about their respective ages, but I distinctly remembered the casual ease through which Bianca had dropped Nico in order to go gallivanting around under Artemis' banner. I also remembered that the one time that I refused to take part to the challenge on one island, Prometheus had managed to make his way back at my mercy once more.

I didn't know enough about Bianca's personality in order to make a decision. I couldn't be sure that she would be a good fit for either the Adamas or Katáktisi but I could try, in the worst case, she would die, wouldn't she? In the best, her friendship would buy us some slack with Hades, and given my suspect that many gods were currently on the fence about my group, I only saw positives.

"I think I'll recruit a demigod." I replied as I started to walk towards the rope ladder that led me on the white sand of the beach, my feet leaving behind clear tracks as I made my way inland. *She was 12-ish, wasn't she?* I distractedly wondered as I walked forward. *Meh, after Annabeth, we'll manage.*

In any case, the genuinely annoying and angsty Nico Di Angelo could remain at the Lotus, safe and most certainly not my problem.

AN

**Abigail:**

**The Eye problem of Abigail is not only an eye problem, as you've seen. We're not quite on the level of Luke's mother, but more around a heavy Luna Lovegood. There is a very good reason why demigods don't casually ask for help from their parents in battle. Remember when the Ophiotaurus needed to be sent away safely? Nemean Lion's pelt had to be sacrificed despite the fact that leaving the Ophiotaurus there would have cause Olympus' fall. So I'm guessing that Percy's plot armor translated in an exceptional discount.**

**Still, I've hinted at Fate, you'll see eventually what I mean.**

**Situation Recap:**

**I'm reminding everyone that 24 June 2002 was the date of the Laestrygonians' end.**

**Since then, there have been a few days to settle in the island, the freeing of Prometheus, roming in the Labirynth, where times is wacky, Kampe, Pan (that I've**

passed off-screen), some kind of convalescence with Dedalus, and the return to the island. All the while I haven't placed dates at the beginning of the chapter, mostly because Icarus wasn't aware of it.

This chapter is a bit of an interlude, I must admit it, but I had to wrap up the return to the island, add some event that happened while Icarus was away, place Briares where he would be useful, and get ready for the last bout of sea-travel.

To recap, since there are now 2 things to take care of, the crew splits:

**On the island:** David (Stone works, defences), Hannah (plants to eat), Abigail (still fucked up), Alexandra (with 0 screen time thus far, grapes-wine-duty, helps Hannah). Dedalus and Briares also stay.

**On the Ship:** Icarus, Charles, Jillian, Hailey, Madison (David's sister with 0 screen time thus far), Charlotte&Emily (daughters of Ares), Sofia (daughter of Apollo), Evelyn (daughter of Aphrodite with 0 screen time thus far), and Annabeth.

How did this one go? Hopes, Ideas?

## Chapter 24: Friendly Exchange

Ok, it's been a while, but I wasn't truly sure about the direction I wanted to take for this next few chapters, but I'm kind of hyped, and I have the feeling that I've learned something in the meantime about the building of a character and the weaving of lore into a story, instead of having a single chapter dedicated to 'power-exploration'.

In case you've forgotten, Icarus (who is dying slowly because of the mysterious 'Names have Power' thing that I'm unveiling bit to bit) is leading the Adamas into the Sea of Monsters looking for the Golden Fleece to bring Thalia back into human form, since she ended up as a tree.

Besides the adventures and pieces of information that I've more or less freely shared up to this point by writing a few reaction-perspectives, Icarus ended up shoring up his ship and his people on the Lotus Island, and just as Circe had both a modern SPA and a bucolic island, he reasoned that from the island, he can walk into the Lotus Club, grab Bianca (powerful demigoddess that casually dropped her brother to have some eternal fun with Artemis' bunch) and return to his search for the Golden Fleece.

## Friendly Exchange

The vast room had its ceiling completely covered in mirrors, with cracks in them that let in blazing, colorful lights that shone over the dancing crowd beneath them. The speakers rose in a chaotic pattern along the walls that were covered with great plasma TVs, each giving life to a stroboscopic display that the mortals barely noticed.

There were stairs on each side of the strangely shaped room that perfectly contained the ever-changing number of dancing people inside, and a twisting corridor that led to another area of the 'Hotel'.

The Lotus Casino, because Casino was a much more exact term to refer to that place, was without a doubt the most lavish place any mortal could ever step foot in: from the videogames to the pools to the food, it was made to thoroughly entertain, to make the mortals slide slowly into a state of being that was close to merely 'existing' than to truly 'living'.

Each mortal walking in was given a card to 'pay' for whatever they wished inside, was fed a lotus petal under the form of a 'snack', and then left to their own devices. After that, a mortal generally was led to visit the room assigned to the newcomers, which was used more as an excuse to abandon everything they had with them than for anything else, since when tiredness overcame someone, he or she simply collapsed on a random couch or armchair that allowed them to rest without ever leaving the 'fun'.

Hermes, god of the Travelers, walked in the place with resigned distaste: some humans were tangentially aware that they were being left behind, that they were crystallized in a single instant of bliss while the world had long since forgotten them, and that was the only thing they truly sought. Escapism at its most extreme: laughter and music loud enough to drown the thoughts resilient enough to poke through the leaden dullness that the lotus petals were capable of inducing.

All those souls, souls that could have burned so brightly, either in joy or in anguish, were simply *there*. And consciously or not, they had forsaken the struggle implicit in their every breath, they lacked that awareness of themselves that pushed mankind towards greater and greater heights.

There were no thieves here, no warriors, no explorers, no dreamers, simply souls that were content with their meaninglessness. Something that was accepted as the better alternative. There were only people who had stopped caring a long time before, awaiting to die without a single thought spared for the value of their lives.

The god sighed sadly as he walked unseen, his steps perfectly quiet even if the blaring of the music would have covered a tank vomiting an endless stream of artillery shots, until he spotted his target, and a genuine smile flashed over his lips.

*Purposeful.* That was a word that well described the bright existence of Icarus: the demigod appeared tired, even with no bags under his eyes, and wasn't the presence of two of them a surprise? Even if the mechanical one was dim when compared to the lone organic eye the demigod was left with.

*He looks terrible.* The thought rose unbidden to the forefront of the god's mind: Icarus' cheeks were just a bit sunk in, his steps wavered just a little, not something that any mortal could perceive, even as his weight rested heavily on his crutch as he walked, the crowd parting around him instinctively.

An impish grin appeared on Hermes features, who finally assumed a defined shape: curly blond hair that reached just beyond his ears, striking blue eyes, a slightly upturned nose, and round, broad shoulders.

Before he could engage and start to talk with the demigod that had managed to hop from smack middle of the Sea of Monsters into Las Vegas' most infamous trap for mortals, Hermes paused, and truly *looked*.

Besides the new burn scar that covered the area surrounding the mechanical eye of the demigod, with the Mist doing a wonderful job of keeping his appearance from scaring the mortals around, the tall, bladed staff that he relied on at each step was *heavy* to Hermes senses in a way few things could be, and instinctively, the god stopped in his advance: while the metal part of the weapon looked like your usual Celestial Bronze, on side of it was... *dangerous*.

It was as if the blade of a straight sword had been roughly snapped in half along its length, leaving behind a jagged wound, which for some reason was far more deadly than the proper edge of bronze. There was a faint shimmer to it, as if the blood of the favorite daughter of Tartarus was only waiting to lash out, to sear and tear.

Then the Mist quivered back into place, and Icarus was relying once more on a simple aluminum crutch.

It was little wonder that Athena wanted Icarus gone: besides the open disrespect of not asking nor sacrificing anything to her when he decided of building an entire city, that weapon held a potential that few others ever did. It didn't help that the haft of the tool used to kill Kampê was made from a branch of Hera's Golden Tree.

At the memory of how the demigod in question had managed to so easily outdo Herakles by relying on Hermes' talents, the god of thieves barely held back a delighted bout of laughter.

The attention of the God of Trade returned to the demigod, who kept moving across the crowd, his eyes roaming over people he quickly dismissed, pausing only to accept with a smile every Lotus Petal that he was given, only to store them into his pockets.

But the true focus of the god remained on the traveler's eyes: in particular to the only organic one he was left with, which almost seemed to shine. And around it, visible only to those that had golden ichor in their veins, Hermes noted the infinitesimal cracks of golden light burning through the skin of the demigod, as if his body could barely contain what was inside.

A twinge of sadness returned to color the god's thoughts when he put together what the mortal had accomplished thus far with his defiant attitude: truly, there weren't other paths for him to take, he would either manage to find a new balance, and die right after because of the stress, or *shatter*, his soul scattered and for the Furies to collect separately.

Still, Hermes had a message to give, and cloaked as he was as a random mortal, he could complete his task despite Zeus' orders, especially in the Lotus Casino, which couldn't be observed from afar.

Almost suddenly, Icarus stopped in his prowling across the halls of the Lotus Casino, and an eager smile appeared on his face: something that resembled a baring of teeth to the world just a bit too much to be described in any way that wasn't 'feral'.

With a new certainty to his step, the demigod dove into the crowd, and he quickly found himself smiling and chatting with an apparently random girl. She had olive skin with just a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, while her silky, dark hair covered her shoulders.

Even when everything about Icarus appeared clear, even when his immediate future was obvious to any god with half a brain to spare, the demigod managed to intrigue and to entertain. And the best part was that he wasn't even remotely aware of it!

Hermes took a couple of steps closer, weaving into the crowd with the expert grace that only he possessed, and felt the anticipation of the event he was witnessing grow with each passing moment. What did Icarus have in common with the girl? Had he been looking for her specifically? If yes, why?

In a matter of minutes, Icarus had led the smiling girl to a small table in a more or less secluded area of the Lotus Casino, where the music that still persisted didn't manage to cover his words: enough for Hermes to listen in by casually lounging on a more or less nearby couch.

"...ren't you bored?" Icarus voice was somewhat ragged, as if it carrying with it an echo of the weariness that must have been weighing on his mortal body, "You've played everything that there was to play here, tasted everything they could offer, over and over by now... would you like instead to try something *new*?"

And there it was. Hermes smiled when he heard those words, something that had nothing to do with charisma seeping into them as the demigod skillfully manipulated the Mist around the little table he was sharing with the younger girl, his voice trailing off into

sounds that couldn't have escaped a human mouth: the rolling of waves rose steadily, warcries chorused in the background, roars and the cracking of stone tinkered right under the table, and even thunder echoed in a controlled manner, only audible to Icarus, the dark-haired child in front of him, and the eavesdropping Hermes.

The confused girl looked around with glazed eyes, the oblivion of the Lotus' charm waning ever so slightly as something wild was shown to her by the demigod's words

Hermes smiled as the words of Icarus transitioned smoothly into Greek, the Mist being skillfully manipulated to build images after the impossibilities that left his lips: the blue of the deepest sea was brought forth, an unbearably grey sky was shown as if it was a column, giants were shown bleeding out on the ground, and flames appeared as seen from far above while they devoured some establishment relentlessly.

It was clear that Icarus was leveraging all he had to perform a fascinating recruitment drive: but the question in Hermes' mind could only grow more prominent and heavy: *why did the demigod wish to recruit the apparently random girl? Why did he want her so much? What did she have of unique, and how could Icarus know something that escaped the careful eye of the God of Thieves?*

Finally, it was with wide eyes that Hermes observed Icarus extend an indulgent finger towards the girl he was seated with: in the moment his finger touched her forehead, her glassy look disappeared, and she clasped hard at the edge of the table, breath suddenly leaving her in ragged gasps, as if the world had suddenly swapped up and down.

It was then that a part of the truth was revealed to the god spying on the unlikely duo: the girl was demigod too.

That only exacerbated the curiosity of the God of Trade: it wasn't unheard of that powerful demigods were granted glimpses of Fate's Tapestry in their dreams, but something as random as the revealing of a demigod that had clearly been hidden purposefully was far too specific, and it didn't have the right kind of *weight* to echo into the uncaring minds of other mortals.

"What... what have you done?" the girl's voice was surprisingly steady as her dark eyes flashed imperiously at the older demigod, who smiled widely as an answer, before shrugging uncaringly.

"You almost managed to free yourself on your own, I barely had to nudge you right there..." the scarred demigod hunched forward expectantly, his only organic eye flashing with anticipation while his teeth remained bared: "To long for freedom and adventure to the point that you'd be able to cut through the Lotus' influence on your own, even when so young and unaware."

Icarus' delight was plain to see, even if he didn't laugh thunderously as Hermes would have expected: "You've seen a small part of what I usually get up to, wouldn't you like to

join? Let's say temporarily, if it turns out that gallivanting freely isn't your cup of tea, I'll return you here, to the company of your brother."

"My brother!" the girls' head turned suddenly as if she wished to summon him with her mere eyes, but her shoulders remained turned in the direction of Icarus, and then she parsed through what she had been told: "Wait... I still want to know why you'd offer me a place on your adventures... why haven't I heard about your game before? And why can't Nico come with?"

Hermes blinked from his hidden position, his confusion lasting an instant before he put together the puzzle: the girl didn't know she was a demigod! And while Icarus clearly knew that, and likely much more, he had decided to keep that truth under silence for the time being, perhaps wisely, as the reaction of the girl was not easy to predict: it was much easier to present himself as someone offering a new option sponsored by the Lotus Casino, and only if the dark-haired child accepted he'd reveal some of the critical information he so closely guarded.

"Too young, too boring, too needy... take your pick, my game isn't the kind in which we can hold your hand for too long." Icarus answered honestly, "Besides, would you really enjoy yourself if you had to look after the brat?"

She was a demigod, but one too unaware of herself and her own nature to be anything more than the smallest blip on Hermes' radar. And yet, the mere fact that Icarus had apparently been seeking her out rose her importance significantly, as well as how clearly sheer *longing* could be seen in her dark eyes, which were nailed on the older demigod's form... oh, how interesting was that combination of events!

How could Icarus know exactly what buttons to push to entice her so? To any observer, and in truth to more or less *anybody* else, the vague descriptions given by the scarred demigod would be off-putting, to say the least.

Instead, this particular girl seemed to be thirsty exactly for what the undisputed captain of the *Adamas* had offered, vagueness included.

"I... I need to think about it." the dark-haired youth was frowning heavily, her eyes seemed even darker than before, cast in shadows as they were.

Icarus accepted readily the wavering answer of the girl, likely knowing that she had already made her decision, and she only asked for time to rationalize what to her should have logically been the most foolhardy thing ever: a perfect stranger offers to let you in in a 'Game' that would let you leave for a few days? And only promise to bring you back if you don't like it?

"I'll wait for you here... for a while." Icarus nodded magnanimously, "But don't take too long, ok?"

After exchanging an intense look between them, the girl rose from her seat and walked away, her arms crossed, almost as if she was hugging herself.

And nobody ever accused Hermes to miss his cue when it was so readily given: without making a sound, the God of Thieves slipped in the vacant space the girl had left behind

"It's me! Your friend Joe!" he boisterously stated, "And I have a message or two for you!"

"Hermes." the demigod immediately accused him, receiving only a fake confused expression in turn.

"Who?" the god of thieves grinned mischievously, "I'm Joe! Gods are no longer allowed to take a direct stand into your roaming, not after the Last Great Fire of San Francisco."

"How did you find... nevermind.", the unflippable, dying demigod got the gist of Hermes' paper-thin defense, and nodded thoughtfully: "You spoke about messages?"

"A couple... and maybe something else." the god of trade smiled, putting all of his charms in the way his teeth flashed, inciting the mortal, letting him glimpse just a bit of an intention that could or could not be there, "If you're willing to trade for it, of course."

A tired sigh from the demigod had Hermes tone down his natural tendency towards annoying the one he was talking with: "A certain huntress accepts that you've held up your end of the deal, so she'll do the same... said between us, without her, I wouldn't have managed to track you down for these messages."

Grief flashed briefly behind the God of Thieves' eyes, peeking through just enough to have the one he was speaking with a frown: "I had forgotten how Pan came to be." Icarus spoke quietly, "My condolences."

A slow nod was all that Hermes answered with, turning his attention to the exchange he had been thinking about in the past days: "Luke didn't deserve to be left behind."

Icarus' only organic eye flashed with understanding before he answered, his posture stiffening slightly as he pressed his palms against the table, as if ready to push himself away: "Maybe, but this is *my* adventure, you see? *My* life, or as I've told the girl, *my Game*. That particular choice was mine alone to make, besides, the less prophecies I play next to, the better."

"You consider the events that cost so much to you and yours a mere game?" the bright blue eyes that Hermes had donned for the occasion darkened slightly, his opinion of Icarus becoming just a bit more exact, "You've been lucky, but given some of your choices, I'm not the only one to think that you know just a bit too much... I must wonder now, with this... what is it? Fear of irrelevance?"



The stoic silence offered by the demigod simply pushed Hermes to smile widely, and if the hunch of his shoulders spoke of a genuine threat, his voice remained steady: "You could have recruited some people with the purpose of making your travel easier..."

"That would have defeated the whole point of sailing from Half-Blood Camp." the curt reply made the God of Thieves frown lightly, and maybe for the first time, he started to consider whether Athena was right in wanting this one *gone*.

"You left Luke behind, with the protections around the Camp weaker than they've ever been since Zeus couldn't use the sacrifice of her daughter to bolster them, as he planned." the God of Thieves didn't bother with mincing words, aware that Icarus was capable enough to turn any speech in a useless loop.

"He planned for his daughter to sacrifice herself?" the dying demigod's dry tone expressed clearly what he thought of that particular bit of information, which coupled with his lack of surprise, did nothing but strengthen the general suspicion that he knew more than what was opportune for a mere demigod.

"Only temporarily." the winning grin Hermes failed to entice a similar answer out of Icarus, "He would have engineered a way to let her roam again when an opportunity arose."

"An opportunity for who?"

"By now, everyone is an old hand at the game." Hermes smirked, ignoring the question as there wasn't a truly dignified answer to give "Only because we cannot interfere against Prophecy, it doesn't mean that we can't take steps to ensure one of our children would be in the running."

"I thought that my actions would grab enough attentions." Icarus tried to deflect the previous accusation of the god he was talking with, but it was to no avail.

Hermes' frown made his opinion on the matter known, even as his eyes darted to the side, spotting the young demigoddess that had apparently just been recruited on the Adamas, "Luke deserves a chance at being part of... whatever you're building."

The tone of the god had turned into something eerily calm, and had Icarus not known better, he would have said that the God of Thieves was asking for a favor: "I think you're underestimating the kind of impact being part of the Adamas has on people." the demigod replied stiffly, "And while I can understand why... *a certain someone that I shall not name* charged Luke with the retrieval of a Golden Apple, it doesn't mean that..."

Hermes' hand smacked on the table, and the cover he was wearing as 'Joe' had never been so thin.

"You're asking for a favor, and not one I'm inclined to give, considering the magnitude of the clusterfuck we're talking about." Icarus spoke calmly, unimpressed by the brief attempt at seizing control of the conversation on the god's part, "But Hermes is one of my favorite Olympians, so I guess... that I could ask you to deliver a message to him, one that says that I'll give Luke a chance at being part of something great once we're back with the Fleece."

"In exchange for something." Hermes' voice returned once more to the one belonging to 'Joe', and a softer smile opened on his features, "Exchanges are at the base of friendly relationships." he spoke merrily.

"Friendly exchanges are what keep everyone around to play." Icarus nodded smartly, tilting his head just enough to indicate a form of respect for the god in disguise, even if his arms retreated from the table in order to be crossed, as if to place a barrier between the demigod and Hermes.

"I'll... give that message." the God of Trade and Travellers grinned openly even as he rose from his seated position, "As for *his* part of this trade... Well, a certain someone with seaweed in his beard might have set his daughter against the Adamas."

Icarus' tone became frosty while he spotted Bianca finally returning from her brief 'thinking-retreat': "It hardly sounds like information that I wouldn't have discovered on my own."

"Ah, but that was only the first half of what I was about to say." the god in disguise hunched forward, his hands briefly landing on the demigods' shoulders as he lowered his voice, enough that it could barely be heard as a whisper: "Many dislike what you're doing because you do it with no care for any of the Twelve, and there is little space in the hearts of those you've chosen for any of the Olympians."

The blue eyes of Hermes' chosen form met the ones of his interlocutor, which were one mechanical and an oddly shining one: "None of us want to be Forgotten, but that fear is even greater in those that do not seat in the Council: and you're founding a city, a temple would be lofty bribery, even without dedicating the city to a single deity."

Hermes strode away with purpose just in time for Bianca to return to the table, her eyes fixed on the retreating form of the god in disguise: "Who was that?"

My eyes went from him to the target of my whole visit at the Lotus Casino while I rose to my feet, leaning a bit on my weapon to decrease the weight on my not-so-steady legs: "A messenger."

The curt reply didn't seem to make the unknowing daughter of Hades any less willing of lancing that particular boil: "And you didn't like the message?"

*Do you dislike lancing boils on your ass with a rusted spear?* I held back an annoyed snarl as I parsed through everything that went between me and Hermes, my head turning to briefly glance at the much shorter girl while I started to make my way back to the older side of the Casino, to the set of rooms with rich decor that turned into an exposition of greek treasures before becoming a strange sort of inner pool, which was instead inside of the natural caver I had used to access Las Vegas.

"I dislike the implication that it was so easy for me to be found." I settled on that mostly honest answer as I walked, Bianca basically glued to my side.

Her voice promised to become annoying in the immediate future as she spoke once more: "Are you running away from someone?"

"You have never wished to stay alone?" I pointedly looked at her, summoning Nico to the forefront of her mind with nothing more than a raised eyebrow.

Satisfaction at the lack of her endless stream of questions made me take a deep breath: *That shut her up.*

For about five seconds: "Don't you want to know if I've accepted your invitation?"

I kept walking in silence, the starting of a migraine making itself known as we passed the Greek section of the building and finally found the descending stairs that led to the cavern that acted as a midpoint between Las Vegas and the Sea of Monsters.

Even the changing environment didn't manage to stop Bianca from talking: "So... I forgot to do so before, but my name is Bianca Di Angelo."

"I wouldn't have cared to know your name if you hadn't decided to join." I shrugged uncaringly at her vaguely offended expression as the stone steps led us to familiar white sand, which temporarily attracted the girl's attention.

"And I was kind of waiting to reach the others before making the proper introductions." I spoke when I noticed that she was about to

The polished floors of the Lotus Casino had long since left space to the sand, and when the cave finally gave way to the open sky, and the boundless sea, I saw that Bianca had stopped, her mouth hanging open as she took in the extreme change in environment; "What...?"

I kept walking without bothering to hide the smile that I felt mounting on my features. *Surprise is the only way to shut her up then, good to know.*

Soon enough we reached the Adamas, the sight of which stopped Bianca from resuming her relentless verbal assault. Some vague screams of cheers echoed from the deck of the Adamas, and the rope ladder that was thrown off the side allowed me to climb quickly, followed by a still gobsmacked Bianca Di Angelo.

When I surpassed the bulwark, slightly winded by the climb and uncomfortably aware of the way in which my muscles uncomfortably pulled on my bones, Annabeth came forward, in all of her diminutive wrath.

Closed punches held against her hips, she assaulted me: "Where have you been?! We've been waiting for *two days!*"

At that moment, with Bianca's endless stream of questions jerkily starting up once more from behind me, and Annabeth's attempts at properly reprimanding me with just the acute tone needed to worsen my migraine, I had a realization.

The pieces fell together as if for an act of God, as if Athena herself had taken residence, for a single instant, into my head. *Is this how mathematicians feel when they solve something impossible?*

*Problem A, meet Problem B. Solve each other.* I smiled widely at Annabeth, who must have caught something in my expression because she took a step backwards, paling instinctively, but it was already too late: "Annabeth, this is Bianca, you're in charge of her training."

"My what?!" the gobsmacked question of the daughter of Hades, coupled with the witless expression of the daughter of Athena instantly healed me of my migraine.

AN

**Okay! It's been a while! But I want to introduce Bianca and properly set up the ending for this 'Odyssey' Arc, so this chapter was kind of mandatory.**

**For the ones who haven't particularly enjoyed this apparently aimless sequence of adventures, I can only say that every piece will be exploited later to enrich the story.**

**I know that Icarus isn't very much relatable up to this point: but he kind of bonded only with Luke and Thalia (somewhat with Annabeth), so he recruited useful people that he could use for his own gains. That they were people with particular skills and whatnot was merely to keep in mind that each of them is a fucking demigod, and thusly capable of becoming a major player, as you'll be seeing relatively soon.**

**Chapter 25: To The Golden Fleece**

**Sorry for the delay! Here's a recap:**

**SI-OC named Icarus is raised by a mysterious 'being' that teaches him about magic and mythology/history, eventually, he starts to abuse his powers in order to live the good life in NY.**

**Thalia, Luke, Annabeth, and Grover stumble on his position thanks to Athena's intervention, and with his help, they all reach Camp Half-Blood without needing the self-sacrifice from Thalia.**

**Icarus manages to become friendly with Dionysus, which grants him minor perks, and he discovers that he's Hekate's son. A child that she had (with a son of Poseidon she arguably kidnapped from the Lotus) so that he'd have some 'metaknowledge'. Basically, I used Hekate to justify the mechanic of Self-Insert.**

**Eventually, Luke gets his task to steal a golden apple, but since he had a spat with Icarus, the latter goes alone, and arrives to the Hesperid Garden first.**

**Icarus goes mad for a bit, holds the sky and 'befriends' Atlas, obtains a few apples which he sends to his hidden lair through Hermes Express, and gets smashed with the Sunset Nymphs. While holding the sky, Icarus' name starts to gain power (very mysterious).**

**Luke and Thalia eventually reach the garden, Luke is enraged because Icarus is already there and draws Ladon's attention to the demigods, who fight it in order to be able to retreat, but Thalia is mortally wounded.**

**They arrive to Camp Half-Blood just in time for Zeus to turn Thalia into a tree, but since there is not self-sacrifice involved, there aren't super powerful magical barriers to defend camp.**

**Icarus has a spat with the Oracle and Luke, Hekate gets some of the apples to organize for her 'son' 's power-up (he wants to 'unlock' the powers of Percy Jackson, so that he'd be able to actually keep up with the more powerful Thalia). Then the MC organizes for an expedition to retrieve the Golden Fleece, which he knows will save Thalia.**

**With no prophecy (= lack of plot-armor) it takes years, and a lot of shit happens to his crew and himself:**

**the Odissey-arc begins on the 13th September of 2000**

**-the ship gets named 'Adamas' (unbreakable)**

**-Annabeth sneaks on board**

**-some demigods that I didn't waste time to write about die**

**-Prometheus is freed**

**-Icarus gets wounded, but the crew kills the Hydra**

**-the Adamas storms and raids Circe's island, where Icarus outsmarts Circe**

**-Icarus & co conquer an island by genocide of man-eating giants**

**-Icarus, the satyr (a Seeker for Pan), and a demigoddes enter the Labyrinth, the power of Icarus' name starts to passively 'harm' the mortal**

**-Icarus, Charles (a satyr) and Abigail (a daughter of Apollo) free Briares and kill Kampe**

**-The group finds Pan, which follows canon but with Charles in the place of Grover, and then they stumble on Dedalus, who joins them**

**-Briares remains to defend the island, along with some of the Adamas' crew and Dedalus**

**-The Adamas sets out and Icarus recruits Bianca Di Angelo on the Lotus Island/Club (previous chapter)**

**Keep in mind that canon should start in the summer of 2004, so Annabeth here is more or less 10, and Bianca is 12**

**And here we are: the tilte of this chapter is pretty self-explanatory, thank you all for reading my works!**

## **To The Golden Fleece**

3 December 2002

The sea stretched endlessly in every direction under a cloudless, blue sky. The uncaring sun flared almost ominously over the waves, its rays bouncing off the crests and scattering in the seafoam as a lonely vessel crossed the blue-green expanse.

The ship had been named Adamas by Icarus, the Captain, and it wasn't quite soaring above the water, but it proceeded in her path with an unwavering focus, and for some reason, no matter how the waves occasionally hit the hull, the trajectory of the vessel was a perfectly straight line, as if neither currents nor winds could do anything but let the boat through.

On the deck of that ship, accompanied by the occasional bout of laughter, Bianca Di Angelo ducked under a swing that would have bisected her and took a step backward, barely avoiding the jab that the devil charged with her training liked so much.

Part of her mind was still trying to come to terms with the fact that the greek gods were a thing, nevermind that she was the daughter of one, but most of her focus was by necessity rerouted towards keeping up with the girl two years younger than her that was repeatedly smacking Bianca around.

The ship almost lurched in answer to a wave that Annabeth was expecting, and with a single sidestep to avoid the clumsy retaliation from the last member of the Adamas, the daughter of Athena used the flat of her training blade to push away the shield-arm of her opponent just enough for her leg to dart up: the sole of her left sandal left a red imprint on her charge's face, and the training bout was over.

"You don't attack enough, you always let me dictate the rhythm of the fight, and you *still* haven't learned to predict how the waves can change your point of balance." her petulant voice, at least to Bianca's ears, summoned a snort out of an older demigoddess who was passing by, but Di Angelo bit her tongue, knowing that anything she said would likely be used against her by the small, blonde demon wearing the skin and appearance of a little girl.

Even on the deck of the Adamas, with the sun hammering unforgivingly over them all, Di Angelo couldn't deny she was having... well, not fun, per se, but she felt like she *belonged* in a way she was utterly unfamiliar with. With a stubborn frown taking place, Bianca straightened, feeling her heart hammer in her chest and the irritating throbbing on her face: "Again."

She demanded, and she received.

Annabeth was younger than Bianca's 12 years old self, and at that age, it meant a noticeable difference in size, even so, the older demigoddess couldn't keep up: what the daughter of Athena lacked in strength, she made up with clever use of the gently bobbing deck they were practicing on, what she lacked in stamina, she made up by using Di Angelo's movements against her.

All in all, neither of the demi goddesses enjoyed the training arrangements that Icarus had more or less imposed on them, but Annabeth wasn't willing to go against a direct order, and Bianca was annoyed that the most inoffensive person on the ship was able to toss her around as an afterthought. On the Adamas, there was always something to do, and the occasional bouts of training among the older demigods managed to steal Bianca's breath away with their complexity and speed.

Obviously, Bianca wanted to be able to go toe to toe with them, and she would, once she managed to kick the ass of the demon wearing a little girl's skin that had been assigned to her training.

"Don't let anger distract you." a female voice made Bianca glance to her left, where a dark-haired girl was leaning against the bulwark separating the upper deck from the larger area where Annabeth was smacking her around, "Your body knows it has to move, but *how* it's supposed to move hasn't sunk in just yet, stay calm, and focus on what you want to do, as well as on what your opponent is about to do, her size limits her options, use that to your advantage."

Bianca grunted in annoyance at the plain suggestions: it wasn't that she didn't understand what she had been told, she *got* that. She understood what she had to do, the point was that *doing* the 'perfect leg sweep' or whatever was fucking difficult when the blonde devil charged her.

Di Angelo didn't have the time to fully parse what she had just been told, that Annabeth was already on her, leading with a half-hearted swing with the short sword she carried in her left only to follow up with two jabs of the dagger in her right: and like often happened, conscious thought seemed to stagger and be left behind by her instinct.

Bianca swatted the first swing with her shield and swung at the incoming dagger, but Annabeth was already shaking her head: an instant later, with a twist of her left wrist that Di Angelo wouldn't have thought possible, the daughter of Athena tapped the flat of the blade against the head of her student.

"You tried to come forward this time, that's better, but not what 'attacking' means." the blonde demon in a little girl's body spoke, "Again, but try to..."

Her counsel was broken by the sudden explosion of thunder, which was immediately followed by the ringing of a bell: almost immediately, the otherwise calm crew mingling around started to run with the calm and focused demeanor that once could obtain only through practice.

"What?" the word didn't manage to completely leave Bianca's mouth when the whole *Adamas lurched*, a fork of lightning flashing ominously in a quickly darkening sky.

Annabeth's hand clamped on Di Angelo's wrist as she started to pull her towards the nearest hatch that led to the inside of the ship: "Storm, and if Icarus rang the bell, it means that it'll be a big one."

Bianca didn't manage to say anything to that while the younger demigoddess dragged her towards the inside of the hull, but raising her head towards the helm, she spotted the ragged features of the man who had recruited her at the lotus casino, the metallic glint of his artificial eye working in tandem with the heavy stare that his biological one was directing ahead.

Turning her head, Bianca gulped while her feet stumbled after Annabeth: not far in front of the *Adamas*, appeared a wall of dark water. It was taller than the ship, and they were going straight into it!



"We've had many of those," the daughter of Athena spoke loudly enough to be heard over the crashing waves and the winds that started howling over the deck, "and while Icarus isn't perfect, he learned very quickly, after the first, we never lost someone to a freak-storm."

"Freak-storm?"

"This Sea doesn't like ships," Annabeth replied, "and Icarus doesn't really care about what he *should* or *shouldn't* do, and he and the crew don't want to make sacrifices in order to ask the Gods for help."

Still trying to wrap her head around the big revelation that was the existence of Greek Gods, Bianca simply followed the younger girl into the galley, where roughly half of the crew was already sitting around the strange bronze brazier that didn't really consume what it should have needed to exude that much warmth.

"And..." Bianca frowned as she was pushed into a seat that had armrests clearly designed to give someone something to hold on to for dear life, "I mean, isn't there anything that we can do to help?"

Annabeth sat by her side, her eyes scrunching close as the *Adamas* lurched again on one side, making all the occupants of the galley hold onto something and shift her barycentre in order to not be flung across the room: "Icarus thought about starting to have someone else holding the helm, but recently he's... tired?" her voice became strained for a couple of seconds, "I guess, I mean, he can't guide the *Adamas* *and* look after other people that aren't inside."

"And he enjoys facing the storms on his own." Di Angelo knew she was right when her blonde companion sniffed uncomfortably, a worried expression appearing on her features. Bianca hadn't known anyone on the *Adamas* for a long time, but what snippets of stories she had managed to pick up painted a clear picture. It was something that filled her with expectations, since it *felt* exactly like what she wanted.

But then a deep groaning of the wood made the newly discovered demi-goddess stiffen in fright: everything she had recently learned had prepared her for the hypothetical situation in which impossible, life-threatening things could actually become real. But what could she do with her instinctive use of weapons against a storm capable of swallowing the ship whole?

found herself closing her eyes like Annabeth, when the thunderous impact of water reverberated across the hull, and almost without realizing it, one hand found itself holding onto the blonde nearest arm. And even if she couldn't see it, she could *feel* the muscles of her 'teacher' relax, if only minutely.

For all of her bluster, it was clear that Annabeth cared for Icarus, even if she'd never admit it, and the only thing Bianca could do was to sit still, keeping each other company

as the Adamas warred for the nth time against the furious tempest. For hours, the two demigoddesses remained next to each other, and if either heard something resembling laughter, it wasn't mentioned.

Many hours later, the power of the waves receded, and the thundering hate of the sky themselves seemed to fade away, allowing the demigods to climb out of the galley in order to assess any damage that befell the Adamas.

Bianca followed hesitantly when Annabeth skyrocketed out of the ship, her feet carrying her unbelievably fast towards the helm, upon which Icarus was... *Slumped?*

The unquestioned captain of the Adamas, the man that had more or less conned her into joining him on a life-threatening voyage, not that she'd ever admit that adventure with no further responsibility was exactly what she had been waiting for, was unconscious, and holding onto the helm with hands that were basically cramps gotten out of control.

Bianca looked with a confused frown at the unconscious demigod that was slowly being pried away from the helm, her attention soon landing on the worried expression of Annabeth, who was biting her lip as she paced around the older people moving the heavy Icarus away from the helm.

Suddenly, a voice Bianca barely recognized as the one belonging to the resident satyr shouted from the bow of the Adamas: "Land-ho! The Fleece is near!"

Bianca looked around with raised eyebrows as everyone roared in jubilation, her brow furrowing minutely as she tried to figure out what the Fleece meant for the group of demigods she had yet to properly get acquainted with.

"Icarus cannot participate." Annabeth immediately spoke, receiving a nod from one of the demigoddesses that Di Angelo still didn't remember the name of, "Look at him, this storm almost killed him, and he's been ill since you returned from the Labyrinth!"

"Peace, Annabeth, I agree." the older demigoddess started directing the others in order to bring Icarus into the hull, "Lay him next to Hestia's brazier, and no Ambrosia, he'll have to wait for the Fleece to heal him."

"Charles, and I will go, we need to be fast and quiet, no point with mounting an assault." Hailey spoke while she raised her arms placatingly, but her expression was hard, uncompromising, only to be interrupted by a blonde.

Bianca's attention slipped away while the group of demigods fell into a bickering mess, noticing the determined expression on Annabeth as she basically hung on the helm, directing the Adamas towards the island spotted by the satyr.

Aware of her own low position on the totem pole of the ship, Bianca moved to the side of Annabeth: "I overheard some stuff, but... what is this Fleece?"

The daughter of Athena quickly started explaining, with uncountable details and many digressions to patch the holes into Bianca's knowledge of Greek lore, and as she kept the Adamas pointed towards the very prize that they had all embarked to find in the first place, she found herself talking about Thalia: "She was wounded on a Quest, and..."

The slightly older girl landed a hand over the blonde's shoulder, squeezing hard, while the latter collected herself: "She was important to you?"

Once again biting her lower lip, Annabeth angrily blinked away the tears that almost covered her eyes, and she nodded, words deserting her for the first time in her life. How was she meant to explain just how much Thalia meant to her? When she had been alone, hunted, scared, hungry, Luke and the daughter of Zeus had found her, they had saved her, defended her, and started to make her capable of defending herself.

She didn't even realize that she was talking, unloading thoughts and memories that she had kept to herself since her first arrival at Camp Half-Blood, but she felt the tight hand of Bianca around her shoulder, and even as she steered the Adamas towards their objective, Annabeth found herself relaxing, even if minutely.

How was the daughter of Athena meant to explain how absurd it had been to be offered shelter by Icarus? A demigod they found only because Annabeth had chased a grey-eyed owl? How absurd it was that Icarus had offered freely most of what he owned, to the point of sacrificing his own safety in order to help? Oh, he was annoying in the extreme, overbearing from time to time, and he kept smirking as if he was part of some joke only he knew the punchline of.

The blonde 10 years old girl still frowned when her thoughts returned to the morning in which all the older campers had sported corks tied to their necklaces, but she had been happy at Camp, with Luke and Thalia and even Icarus, and the countless activities and books and more than anything: safety. She had been trained there, sure, so violence didn't actually leave her life, but spiders stopped hunting her, and there weren't cyclops ready to eat her.

Annabeth was still annoyed because she felt more often than not that she was the punchline of Icarus' silent jokes. But... she had infiltrated the Adamas when it was still named Argo II, and she had freed Prometheus without knowing the true impact of her actions: Icarus had been imaginative with his punishment, that was true, but he had also *explained* and the daughter of Athena had listened.

And since then, she had *understood*.

Her eyes skittered over the still arguing demigods before they landed on Charles, still on the bow of the Adamas, and Bianca, who didn't quite know how to help her youngest friend through the emotional rollercoaster she had just gone through.

For all of their skill and experience, the people that had remained on the *Adamas* were all interested in *adventure* more than *success*. The demigods left on the island had started to build something, to learn, to sprout roots, so to speak. The crew that Icarus had kept with him was more or less the same ragtag group of people that had abandoned Half-Blood Camp simply because they were *bored*.

Without their captain to actually give them direction, when it came down to the core of a task, they started bickering like children: and that, when both Icarus and Thalia so clearly needed the Fleece, was so stupid that it became dangerous.

Charles walked back from the bow of the *Adamas* with a bright smile that dimmed minutely at the sight of the bickering demigods, his eyes quickly roaming over the crowd before landing on Annabeth and Bianca: "Icarus is still down?"

Bianca nodded before Annabeth could, and the girl stepped aside as Charles's hand landed on the helm, steering the *Adamas* a bit: "We'll drop the anchor so that the wind doesn't bring our smell to the island, but it also means that we'll need to use a rowboat to reach one of the beaches, given that the sun is already going down, we'll sleep on board tonight and make land with the team needed to retrieve the Fleece tomorrow."

Annabeth pursed her lips in thought and walked away from the crowd now that someone had taken the helm with an actual idea about where to lead the ship besides 'towards the island', and Bianca was quick to follow, feeling better about hanging around with the younger girl than the group of demigods that had more or less been dismissive in her confronts up to that moment. Besides Icarus, in fact, she had yet to establish a proper connection with the single individuals of the *Adamas*.

Oh, she felt like she belonged, that was true, how could she deny the excitement and joy that she felt every day since she had been 'recruited' from the Lotus Casino? Still, the older demigods cared more about actions than anything else, and a twelve years old girl, besides being the latest to join the *Adamas*, hadn't shown yet anything truly extraordinary, nothing to mark her as something worthy of the effort Icarus had gone through in order to retrieve her.

Noticing that she was being followed, Annabeth suddenly grabbed the older demigoddess' wrist and dragged her toward the temporarily deserted bow of the ship, her eyes darting around before landing on the ever-growing shape that indicated the island spotted by the satyr: "I don't think anyone noticed, Icarus is good at hiding the stuff he wants to keep concealed... do you want to help?"

The question was jarring in a way that gave Bianca whiplash as she refocused her attention on the younger girl: "What?"

"You heard them." Annabeth huffed, "Even with a clear hierarchy, Icarus left the more level-headed of us on the island, this crew is more or less composed by..."

"By?"

The daughter of Athena bit her lip for a second, her head swirling on her neck almost like an owl's as she checked her surroundings: "Everyone that joined Icarus besides me and Charles did so for the glory and adventure, but while the Adamas' crew did a lot of stuff, only a select few actively participated with the truly important stuff, and besides Charles, those are all on the island..."

"And the people here all want to leave Icarus' shadow now that he's k.o.?" Bianca guessed as she too looked around, trying to spot whatever Annabeth was looking for.

The daughter of Athena nodded quickly: "They'll all end up waging war on Polyphemus, wasting days to be sure of their success, but have you seen Icarus?"

Bianca frowned, recalling the image of the unconscious man responsible for her presence on the Adamas: "Yes? So? He just dragged the ship through a storm that lasted *hours*, it makes sense that he'd be exhausted."

Annabeth exhaled gutsily as she brought her hands up to massage her temples, her eyes scrunched in an annoyed expression: "I had forgotten that you've just joined... listen, Icarus has storms like that for breakfast, more than once he dragged everyone through far worse, by the gods, he slew Kampê, he held the *sky*, he just..."

The younger demigoddess took a deep breath, her eyes darting around as if expecting to spot someone eager to overhear the words leaving her mouth. "He doesn't *just* go unconscious, not after something as minor as the last storm, and you heard Sofia, no Ambrosia? It means that she already knew that there is something serious about him, and he's been looking more and more haggard..."

"Since he returned from the Labyrinth, yes, you mentioned that." Bianca frowned, "I'm not getting where you're aiming at..."

Annabeth bit her lip once more, her attention washing over the deck of the Adamas in order to check for the presence of other people, when she confirmed that they weren't being overheard, her eyes met those of Bianca with a determination that was clearly visible around the young girl: "Haily said something that made sense, we need to be quick and quiet, and I'm worried for Icarus..."

Bianca, that didn't know the daughter of Athena inside out just yet, jerked back as she realized what the long-winded speech had been aiming at: "You want to... what? Sneak in and steal the Fleece before the others get started?"

"Icarus might die without it!"

Di Angelo raised her arms in a half-defeated manner, her eyes not leaving the blonde devil that suddenly reminded her of the captivating Icarus that had talked with her at the

Lotus Casino: "No offense, but you're ten, and I've barely gotten started with this life, I'd help you, but it doesn't seem like it's wise..."

"I'll do it on my own then." Annabeth frowned, taking a step back from the slightly older demigoddess, "If you don't want to help..."

It's not about that!" Bianca wanted to punch the blonde in front of her then, maybe if she put enough strength into it, she might be able to throw her into the sea... on the other hand, Annabeth might just do some kung-fu bullshit and break her arm without thinking about it: "Of course I want to help, and if you're right, then it's better to sneak in, of course, but..." she sighed, trying to collect her thoughts to talk in a coherent manner, "I've never done anything of the sort, I'm barely getting started on how to sail and fight..."

"It's not about being able to fight!" the grey-eyed 10 years old girl stepped forward, her hands grasping the wrists of her charge when it came to combat training, "Listen, here's the situation: Icarus might die, and the others aren't going to listen. Are you going to help me, or not?"

To that question, there could be only one answer.

The Adamas eventually reached the island proper, and the anchor was dropped underwind from Polyphemus' home while the somewhat rowdy group of demigods retreated into the hull of the ship to discuss the strategy for the following days. Already, both Annabeth and Bianca listened to how the daughters of Ares were planning to dig some trenches to have the blind cyclops trip in an eventual chase, while the resident daughter of Hephaestus had gotten started with traps that heavily relied on Greek Fire.

With the stars shining clearly in the cloudless sky, and only a sickle of new moon to provide light, Annabeth and Bianca sneaked out of the galley and onto the deck, quickly making their way towards one of the row-boats that had been readied by one side of the Adamas.

The two demi goddesses undid the knots under Annabeth's guidance and activated the small system of pulleys that gently lowered their smaller vessel into the sea.

Exchanging a final meaningful stare, the daughter of Athena and Bianca readied themselves to use the ropes still tied to the rowboat to descend, when a female voice made them freeze on the spot. "Of all the fools that could have attempted to leave on their own, I didn't expect to find you two."

Both the girls turned towards the intruder with excuses already on their lips, only for Annabeth's expression to go from fearful to accusatory in a split of a second.

Clad in a leathery armour, with sword and daggers strapped to her form, Hailey was staring down the younger girls, her visage wavering between amused and annoyed, only for her eyebrow to twitch at the following accusation.

"You were going to sneak on the island too!" Annabeth was quick on the uptake if nothing else, and Bianca readily realized that the younger girl was right.

Before the daughter of Hypnos could defend herself, the soft thump of hooves revealed the presence of Charles, who had just walked out a nearby patch of shadows: "Have you seen Icarus condition?"

"And you need the Fleece in order to be heard when you reveal the truth about Pan to the council back at Half-Blood Camp." the daughter of Athena didn't waste a second to attack the satyr, even if her voice sounded slightly spooked by his sudden appearance.

"More than one thing can be true at once, you know?" the satyr was unapologetic as he regarded the two much younger girls, "I thought you would have picked that up from Icarus if nothing else." then he turned towards the daughter of Hypnos: "What do we do?"

"I can't send them to sleep," the oldest demigoddess on deck replied with a slight shake of her head, "I'm tapped out after dealing with the rest of the crew."

"What!?" Bianca edged closer to the incensed Annabeth, which had enough sense to keep her outrage to a manageable volume, "You sent the others into an enchanted sleep? But..."

"We can't be the only ones willing to sneak out to do our own things when Icarus isn't around, can we?" Di Angelo noted with a strange, jittery feel bubbling up from her gut, she had decided to help the daughter of Athena, and if she had to fight to be useful to her friend, then she would...

"I'd say that we're daring enough already." Hailey's lack of an aggressive demeanor however managed to not make the unstable situation worse, and even if Bianca had landed her inexperienced hand on the handle of a sword, she didn't attack. "What I could do to keep everyone asleep has been done, and I'm out of juice for a few hours still... Charles, you're necessary to pinpoint the Fleece, and neither of the girls will pull back, if we fight, then they'll wake at least one of the others, and this whole mission will go to the Styx in a handbasket." Hailey frowned heavily, her attention unwavering from the two younger demigoddesses.

"Wait," Annabeth's naturally contrary disposition came out as she considered once again the daughter of Hypnos: "Why would you want to do it? Charles has his 'secondary' reasons..."

"How cynical of you, to expect me to have a personal aim." Hailey snorted dismissively, "Bianca is desperate to let loose, and you don't really trust anyone on this ship besides Icarus, and maybe your new friend. But you see, this is much more simple," the young woman smiled softly, "even with all of his secrets, and his meaningless fascination with Thalia's powers, the captain is my friend, and that's all there is to it."

"So you aren't after the glory of retrieving the Fleece?" Annabeth frowned suspiciously, while she straightened her back, finally realizing that they weren't going to fight.

"It is difficult to hunger for glory when you see the stuff I've seen." Hailey grinned as an answer, her attention returning to Charles while he started to row towards the small beach, "But admittedly, I'd enjoy telling Icarus that he owes me, and he owes me big...I'd have preferred to not have two kids as inexperienced as you are with me, but you won't desist, I know that much."

Charles realized where the conversation was going and he wasted no time in descending to the rowing boat beyond the bulwark of the Adamas, soon followed by Hailey, who tossed over her shoulder: "So, are you coming?"

After the two younger girls exchanged another meaningful stare, they were quick to join the first two members of the Adamas. And if even Annabeth felt a bit safer in having the guide and power of Charles and Hailey on her side beside the stalwart but inexperienced Bianca, she kept quiet about it: otherwise, she'd be the one to never hear the end of it.

AN

**YES! With the next couple of chapters, we can finally close this Odyssey-Arc!**

**I glossed over the storm because we've already seen a few of those, and I was more interested in Bianca's reaction than anything else, after all, this is the first half of *her* introductory chapter. Or at least the one in which she gets her 'baptism of fire', so to speak.**

**I also managed to give Annabeth's opinion on the people currently on the Adamas, an opinion that is more or less accurate. Not much actually happens in this chapter, but I needed to make up for the utter lack of characterization in my story up until now, so bear with it please.**

**Once again, opinions on Bianca? Canon-wise, the only thing we know of her personality is that she wanted to have fun without having to look after her brother, and I'm using Annabeth to train her in order to work a bit on the characterization that I have more or less ignored up until now. So I made her eager of keep going, and with a more or less hidden desire to stretch her wings.**

**We also see something of Hailey's mentality, which I'll explore further eventually, and Annabeth is clever enough to pick up on the implications of Pan's death, along with Charles's excited demeanor when it comes to the Fleece. If she's a bit cynic after being triked by Prometheus and after so long spent with Icarus as 'model', well, we can hardly blame her, can we?**

**Opinions? Hopes?**



**The next chapter will be a fun one, one that hopefully will inject a different kind of action in the story, as well as to set up the next, much shorter and intense, Arc.**

## **Chapter 26: A quick plan**

### **A Quick Plan**

The stars and moon shone balefully over the relatively quiet, calm waves that separated the Adamas from the beach, the water appeared like the furry back of some giant beast, streaked with sidereal light when its hairs moved with the neverending breathing of the ocean.

The rowboat moved quietly above the water, which almost looked like some black mirror until a wave broke with a low murmur of crashing water, the seafoam acting almost like a veil covering and uncovering the reflection of the moon and stars. Despite the storm that had more or less delivered the Adamas on the shores of Polyphemus' island, there were no clouds, and the wind was almost completely absent.

Only the mundane breeze typical of any place on the sea occasionally ruffled the hairs of the four people that had decided to try their luck, and the silence quickly grew uncomfortable on Annabeth's shoulders.

The daughter of Athena checked her dagger to make sure it'd move freely from its sheath, her grey eyes darting around as if waiting for an inescapable assault, only to return her attention to Hailey, who sat with her eyes pinned on the beach they would soon reach.

"So, what's the plan?" Annabeth asked both to break the silence and to mentally prepare for what was to come: in her mind, she and Bianca would have had to figure something out as they went, since they knew virtually nothing of Polyphemus' island, but the daughter of Hypno that was apparently the leader of their little expedition had long been part of Icarus' small group of 'officials'. *She'd better have a plan.*

It wasn't the older girl to answer the daughter of Athena, but the satyr, who rowed with a constancy that saw the rowboat quickly nearing the sandy beach: "Polyphemus sleeps at night in his cave, which he opens and closes with a giant rock."

The answer was... unsatisfactory: "And..?" Bianca edged forward on her seat, her hands nervously fidgeting with the still unfamiliar weight of the celestial bronze sword secured at her hip.

"We'll figure it out." Hailey shrugged without turning, "Either Charles uses some vines to dig through the rock while I do what I can to keep Polyphemus asleep, or we'll need to hide until dawn, and sneak away with the Golden Fleece as soon as it's unguarded."

"What if it's always under guard?" the daughter of Athena couldn't avoid pointing out that particular option, after all, if any demigod's mission could succeed only basing itself on wishful thinking, the past years at sea would have been much different.

The rowboat hit the sandy bottom with a subdued rasping sound, as if it too didn't wish to awaken the trouble that assuredly awaited the demigods and the satyr on the island. Hailey nimbly jumped overboard, her feet landing in the shallow sea with a splash as she moved towards the back of the boat by walking.

"What are you doing now?" Bianca asked with genuine curiosity, the strange behaviour enough to take her mind away from the heart-hammering anticipation that she felt.

"We need to take the boat on the beach," Charles was quick to reply as he copied the movements of the older girl, "but having it turned towards the Adamas will allow for a slightly faster departure, so..."

Annabeth and Bianca exchanged a glance at the thoughtful reasoning before they too jumped off the boat, walking uphill on the fine sand of the beach while they waited for the older half of their group to finish their preparations.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Bianca asked her friend as their eyes attempted to peer through the half-hearted gloom of the night.

Annabeth frowned at the question: "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You wanted to do something because the rest of the crew is..." Bianca hesitated, her head twisting towards the older half of their group which was still busy pushing the rowboat around.

"A bunch of glory-hounds."

"Well, yes," the last to join the Adamas returned her focus to the younger girl, "but Hailey and Charles wanted to do this on the down-low too, and they seem like they know what they're doing."

"I thought you were all for some *real* action!" Annabeth huffed, crossing her arms while she stared imperiously at the other demigod.

"I am." Bianca was quick to reply, "This kind of thing is... this adventure, the risk, the moving around quietly... it is *so freeing!*" a wide smile pictured itself on her face, "You have no idea how much I enjoyed each terrifying instant of the storm, even if I could do nothing about it, but, all that I'm saying is that..."

"Use your own words." Annabeth snarked softly, her annoyance at the hesitation of her friend warring with the clear trepidation she could see on her features.

"Yes, well, if your only reason to try and retrieve the Fleece was to spare time and bypass the whole campaign they looked like they were mounting," Bianca took a deep breath before going on, hesitating for an instant, only to find again her determination when her friends' eyes glinted under the gloomy moon, "then you shouldn't have fought so hard to be here with Hailey and Charles, which wanted the same thing."

The younger girl pursed her lips in distaste, uncrossing her arms only for her right to close on her dagger, clenching madly around its hilt, as if drawing strength from it. Her head turned almost like an owl's on her neck as she looked at Hailey and Charles, which were about to finish the preparations for their future departure, and then she turned her whole attention to Bianca, who stepped back when faced with the palpable, sheer... *something* that irradiated from the daughter of Athena.

"Cyclops are... *evil*." the certainty in her voice couldn't be denied, and the last girl to join the Adamas found herself simply nodding while she mimicked the movements of her friend by clutching the hilt of her still-sheathed sword, as if to reassure herself.

"They *eat* lost demigods, they *copy* their voices to make you leave your hiding place to join your friends." the grey eyes of the younger girl were almost hazed, as if she wasn't seeing the beach at night anymore, but something wholly different.

If nothing else, Bianca was quick on the uptake and realized that Annabeth had some *awful* memories about them, and this was the girl that managed to stare down *anyone* on the Adamas despite the abyssal difference in age and experience. So she took a step forward and placed what she hoped was a reassuring hand on the shoulder of the daughter of Athena.

When Bianca squeezed, not quite lightly, not so harshly as to cause pain, Annabeth blinked away the nightmare she had fallen into, her expression flickering for a moment before she turned a thankful smile to her friend: "It's... I *know* that they terrify me, but, I've been on the Adamas as long as anyone else, and..."

"You wanted to prove yourself."

"More like I want to prove to myself that I'm *better* than I was." the daughter of Athena shook her head minutely, "I mean, objectively, I've learned *loads* since the beginning, but, what does it matter, if I cannot face my fears?"

The scraping of feet on the sand alerted the younger half of the group that the satyr and the daughter of Hypno had finished their preparations, and as Bianca and Annabeth turned, their shoulders pushed lightly one against the other, quietly and jokingly promising one the support of the other.

"We're ready." Hailey delivered two pouches each to Bianca and Annabeth, "Small cubes of ambrosia in one, small vials of one of the re-adaptations of Greek Fire, it won't burn like the original, but it has a bit of a 'boom' when the vials are crushed."

Opening one pouch, Bianca looked the few clay vials that looked extremely frail, and gulped. The moment of emotional upheaval with her friend had come and gone, now, everything was back to business: "So," she swallowed her trepidation, trying to focus, "how do we proceed?"

"First, we find Polyphemus' abode, then, we'll figure it out." Charles set out at the head of their small group, his nose twitching madly as he followed the undeniable scent of the Golden Fleece.

The sand under their feet gave way to lush, green grass, and after a while, the slight uphill of the beach turned into a plain that led to soft, rolling hills that almost looked like velvety waves under the light of moon and stars. Even in the quiet of the night, with the scarce visibility that it brought, it was obvious that there was something magical at work.

Annabeth felt it on her skin, almost like a revitalizing tingle, Bianca held back a shiver when the grass under her feet returned to its previous, unbent state with a bounce after each step. While Charles followed the powerful scent of their objective, Hailey was focused, her eyes darting around freely while she kept ready for anything.

Following an instinct that none of the demigods could name, they moved in silence, the murmur of the asleep world around them was the only soundtrack to their mission, not even minutely disturbed by their passing.

From hill to a small stretch of woods, from a bucolic creek that gurgled sleepily in the night, they reached an area where the always-lush grass barely covered the rocky and unforgiving ground, and once the group found the unmistakable tracks of Polyphemus, they simply followed them.

Charles moved sure-footed at a barely restrained power-walk, the intensity of the Fleece's presence heavy on his senses as he led the group of demigods. After maybe five-hundred steps that led the group around a hill and in its moon-cast shadow, they saw it: against one hill whose side appeared to have been flattened by a judicious application of unrestrained violence, there was a titanic rock that easily matched a three-story building.

In a rough spherical shape, the rock was their last obstacle before Polyphemus himself, and it was more or less embedded into the side of the hill. In the slightly darker environment caused by the position of the moon behind the hill, the uneven 'archway' that more or less marked out the closed entrance to the cyclops' abode was almost camouflaged. Pressed rocks and dirt were held in place by the roots of a small outcropping of trees atop of the hill, and even on the more or less vertical wall, the grass had grown, just as lush and lively as the one the demigods had walked over up to that point.

"What now?" Bianca's eyes roamed the side of the hill as she quietly approached the vast rock stopping them from going forward.

"Well, in the Odissey, Polyphemus is the only one strong enough to move it." Annabeth commented without hesitation, her brow furrowed in concentration while she checked the dagger at her side.

"It is lucky then, that we're not Ulysses." Charles spoke idly as he moved about, his hands turned towards the plants as he inhaled deeply.

The snort of Hailey brought everyone's attention on her, who was shaking her head lightly with her hands on her hips: "It's an old joke: if the caveau's door cannot be forced, the wall is an easier target. Charles, how powerful are the trees that keep together the flattened side of the hill, given the presence of the Golden Fleece?"

"Extremely." the satyr's hand landed in one of the large pockets that he had on his short cargo pants before pulling out a Pan's flute, "You're thinking of burrowing a side entrance?"

"If you can do so without awakening Polyphemus." the daughter of Hypno added, "If I can get close enough to him while he's already asleep, then I'll be able to deepen it, it'll give us enough time to sneak away and sail as the moon sets."

Annabeth and Bianca could hardly work through their disbelief, the first, because her vague plan involved an ambush as soon as the cyclops moved his unwieldy door, and the latter because the solution to the danger presented by an eventually awake and enraged Polyphemus had just been sidestepped. The brief disappointment at the lack of a challenge like the ones he had heard narrated on the Adamas his her for a couple of seconds before she remembered the urgency of delivering the Fleece to Icarus.

Hailey smirked at the younger girls while Charles started to softly play his holy instrument: "This isn't our first rodeo, kids: thinking out of the box is the only thing that kept us alive against the man-eating giants, or Circe."

To the soft tune of the satyr's magic blowing through Pan's flute, the plants around the small group seemed to slowly stir, as if awakening from sleep. The murmur of the not far sea and the breeze that rustled the leaves on the trees changed minutely with the shifting sand and dirt that was moved by roots following the will of Charles.

It wasn't a quick, sudden appearance of an opening in the side of the hill, it wasn't a blazing wave of *nature* or whatever a Hippy would have described it as. Simply, the Fleece-enhanced flora followed the gentle coaxing of one that had been in the presence of Pan himself before he fully faded, and the touch of the lord of the Wild still hovered about his steps.

Charles would be the one to mobilize the other satyrs, to pummel awareness into the minds of mortals. How could any human not see the horror that was damaging the world, poisoning its waters, slowly erasing the biodiversity that made it such a wonderful and rich place? How could they not see that harming Nature was the same as harming

themselves? The satyr weaving his determination into his tune lent his very will to the defenseless trees that stretched towards the sky atop of the hill, the One-Who-Found-Pan whispered his need to the grass, which shifted slightly to accommodate for the necessity of the one that played such a sweet, melancholic song.

Roots burrowed from atop of the hill, the overflowing life force that the Fleece granted them more than enough to allow them the power needed. Charles could feel the sheer *trust* that the ancient Olive Tree placed in him by following his tune, he could hear the delighted defiance of the Maritime Pine that bowed to the will of the One-Who-Found-Pan. The roots clawed their way through the flattened side of the hill, pushing and dodging the compressed mixture of rock and dirt which looked almost like a cliff, and the grass, less individualistic than each of the trees that Charles could feel, shifted just enough as to behave like a net, holding back the mass that the trees had parted. With each second, the roots burrowed, breaking through the rock with the quiet strength of the things that grow.

Invisible to the eyes of the demigods, Charles felt the roots trickle through the main wall of Polyphemus' abode like the beginning of a waterfall, and once the trees' presence had reached the base of the cyclops' hill, almost like the parting of a curtain, the roots pushed aside the stone that they had broken into smaller fragments, and the grass held tightly on the changed soil that sustained it.

With a decreasing volume that almost sounded like a sigh, Charles fell to the ground, his Pan's flute rolling over the grass while he panted for breath, a thick sheen of sweat covering completely his face as his breath came and went in a ragged rhythm that tripped on his clenched teeth.

"Charles!" the scared whisper of Hailey saw her to his side in a split second while the other two girls approached with worry clearly etched on their features, "What's wrong?"

The satyr had been completely absorbed by his own song until a moment before, but now he looked like he had just run for a month without stopping, and Annabeth fancied she could almost hear the frantic beating of his heart.

"T-t-t-too much..." a convulse cough was barely muted by Hailey's hand as she dragged the exhausted satyr from the small opening in the wall of Polyphemus' abode.

"Shh," the oldest demigod present coaxed the satyr, bringing a canteen to his lips and making sure he drank in small sips, "we have time, breathe, then explain."

It took a few minutes, but Charles eventually recovered enough to take deeper and slower breaths, enough to rise to a seated position, even if he looked like death warmed over: "The Fleece... the plants are more *alive*, but the cave is more *solid* too, I didn't even notice how much the tune took from me, this was the best I could do, don't count on me for the rest of the week."

Hailey's face turned towards the narrow opening in Polyphemus' wall and her face immediately twisted into a grimace: "I'll never be able to pass in there."

Where her eyes pointed, there was something that resembled a smooth crack in the grass-covered wall: she could maybe fit it sideways, but not enough to have freedom of movement, which was mandatory if she wanted to cross the thick wall. And that was not to mention the height of the opening, which would have forced the older demigod to crawl on one of the inner walls of the passage not unlike a lizard if she was to have any hope to pass.

The proper adventure that the last member of the Adamas had thought she'd miss because of the urgency of Icarus' situation didn't seem so far now: "Well," Bianca walked up to the opening, and confirmed that she would have barely to duck to move under it, "it won't be a problem for Annabeth and I."

The presence of the two much younger, and thus smaller, demigods, now looked much less like a coincidence, and more like a suspicious chain of events. "I dislike when the solution is blatantly provided by the circumstances." Hailey crossed her arms as he thought over the proposal she had just heard, distaste peeling back her lips just enough for a showing of teeth.

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Annabeth's voice didn't waver when she looked at the unofficial boss of their small group, even if her eyes were wide and her dominant hand clutched savagely on the dagger at her waist.

Hailey's grimace worsened: "Annabeth, you're very young, Bianca just joined, we have no idea about her powers..."

Bianca shrugged off her comment by placing a hand on the youngest demigod's shoulder: "I joined Icarus for the adventure, this sounds exactly like what I've signed up for, and Annabeth has been on the Adamas as long as everyone else, has she not? Besides, she's smart."

The daughter of Athena nodded sharply at her friend's support: "And Charles doesn't look like he can walk, never mind run if we need to."

"So, you not only want me to leave you alone to do something so *blatantly* dangerous, but you also relegate me to delivery-man?" Hailey's eyes flashed dangerously for an instant, before the soft snore of the satyr brought back to the forefront of her mind the entirety of the situation.

"Polyphemus is blind, we have electrical torches, and as long as we don't flash them into the sheep, they'll keep sleeping." Annabeth's logic came once more to tilt the situation in her favor and with a huff, the daughter of Hypno freed herself from her satchel, silently handing it over.

"I'll bring Charles back to the rowboat, then I'll come back." Hailey moved to place the satyr over her back, adjusting to the changed balance before turning towards the younger girls, "I'll flash a torch into the crack of the wall when I return, and I want you to come out if you think you can't make it before then, *deal?*"

That meant that Bianca and Annabeth had an hour, an hour and a half at most, to move through the opening that they barely fit in, make sure that they wouldn't wake the sheep or the cyclops, find the Fleece, bag it, and making it back. As if it was a run to your regular grocery store.

"Deal." Bianca nodded before Annabeth could protest, and started to drag her towards the crack in the wall that represented their only access to Polyphemus' abode, "Let's move before she changes her mind." she added in a low hiss that managed to get the daughter of Athena to move.

Bianca showed no hesitation in moving forward, and reassured by her friend's determination, Annabeth followed while she swallowed her fear, the darkness soon forcing her to lit a torch in order to see where she placed her feet: "How can you know how to move? It's pitch dark!"

Bianca shrugged while she kept moving: there was something reassuring in the steady presence of the earth above her, and following some instinct that she couldn't name, her feet always found a steady place were to land. Her heart sang in her chest, expectation and the thrill of something so wonderfully *new* filling her with an energy she could barely contain.

Leaving the baby-sitting in the Lotus, for there she knew her brother was safe with or without her, in order to randomly sail the world? That had been intriguing. Sailing from adventure to adventure, always seeing and doing something new? With the only responsibility towards herself first and foremost? No hollow duty to be followed because each of her comrades was just as capable, if not more, than herself? The challenge of each new adventure coupled with the attempt of becoming better than people that would grow to be her friends?

Bianca had no doubt in her mind that she'd have joined Icarus every day of the week and twice on Sunday. That choice was clear in her mind, without the faintest shade of doubt: he had opened the doors to an impossible world that apparently was her inheritance (and of her brother, but he was too young to be entrusted with the truth and the danger it brought).

The storm had been frightening, and back then she had shivered in doubt, even with Annabeth by her side. But looking back? She didn't regret it, at all. That impossible storm, the training with the daughter of Athena, who proved to be infinitely more mature and capable than her little brother, each of her days on the Adamas... that had been only the starter.



Now, by coincidence, she was leading her first friend into the cave of an infamous cyclops, with the intent of stealing from under his nose a priceless, ancient artifact that would not only heal Icarus, whatever he had to be so ill after the storm, but that could also 'bring back to life' -and Bianca was still baffled by that- another girl which had been turned into a tree years before.

Annabeth, who was constantly reinforcing her own determination by focusing on the good times she had had with Thalia and on all the stuff she had learned since her first day on the *Adamas*, followed Bianca with a quiet drive that was constantly hammered against by the old nightmare that cyclops represented in her psyche.

Soon however, the quiet murmur of the island at night faded in favour of a rolling, constant, and repetitive sound. It wasn't music, that was for sure: landslides crashing into the curve of a river couldn't be pleasurable to the ear.

"The sea?" Bianca frowned, "We shouldn't be so low."

"It's not the sea." Annabeth replied quietly as she left behind the narrow passage with a last wavering step: "That's *him*, snoring."

Now that they were fully into the pitch-black cave, the soring of the immense creature reverberated in their ribcages and made their ears almost hurt: only from the sound, the two could tell that the abode of the monster was vast beyond what they had imagined. Without waiting further, the daughter of Athena slipped an electric torch into her hand and pointed it towards the ceiling.

The hand of Bianca on her shoulder tightened minutely, and Annabeth perceived more than saw her nodding.

With a click that got completely lost in the thundering breath of the cyclops, a minuscule beam of light shone on a ceiling that might have been twenty meters above them. Their jaws almost fell on the ground.

If it was a consequence of Charles song or merely the prolonged exposure to the Golden Fleece neither Annabeth nor Bianca could know, but just under the rocky ceiling that was the top of the hill, roots as wide as minivans had burrowed through the rock, and many of them jutted almost as spikes towards the ground.

"I'm going to strangle that satyr." Annabeth's whisper barely reached the ears of Bianca, who nevertheless shook her head, her attention returning to their situation.

"It's a miracle he's still sleeping." Bianca readily agreed, but as she looked at the ceiling, a beginning of an idea took shape in her mind.

The rumble of Polyphemus' snoring made them both wince and turn towards the end of the cave, from where the sound came more strongly. Of course, given the massive lung capacity of the cyclops and the enclosed space, the snore echoed oddly against the walls

of stone, and the sound didn't manage to fade before the one-eyed creature took another breath.

Methodically, Annabeth's flashlight revealed the ceiling and the walls of the cave side by side, always carefully inching forward and never shining upon the ground, as neither of the girls wanted to awaken the sheep, who could make enough of a mess when scared as to wake the much scarier Polyphemus.

Ultimately, she lowered the beam of light enough to shine upon a hairy back, which rose up and down with the breathing of their one-eyed enemy.

After having squeezed her eyes to discern in which direction the head should be, Annabeth went ahead and lowered their source of light once more, making it roll down the creature's spine and over the thankfully conservative wool shorts that covered the ass of the beast. Still, nothing golden reflected the light, and Bianca decided to move a bit to the side of the cavern to try and have a better point of view.

From what Bianca could tell, again following the strange instinct that had led her feet during the crossing of the underwhelming tunnel created by Charles, the cave didn't have anything resembling rooms: it was a single, mostly flat open space. Of course, saying open space didn't quite transmit how the two girls felt in being in a cave that measured more or less twenty meters to the ceiling and triple that length in-depth, not to speak of the thirty or so meters that separated one side of it from the other.

The rational part of Annabeth's mind that could enjoy architecture as a daughter of Athena simply decided that she wasn't dealing with the space-warping properties of a cyclops' cave, and so her grey eyes managed to remain focused on the task of finding the Fleece.

It was mammal anatomy that allowed her to shine her torchlight just above the still backs of the sleeping sheep that separated the two girls from the likely position of their target.

Bianca finished guiding Annabeth towards one side of the cave while she kept seeking, but without success: "What do you want to bet that he uses the Fleece as a pillow, or something like that?"

The daughter of Athena grimaced in the dark before edging her torchlight towards the back of the cyclops: it wasn't like his only eye was on the nape of his neck, and unless the anatomy of Polyphemus wasn't truly unique even among his misbegotten kind, it meant that it was safe enough to check there from a distance.

Surely enough, a glint of gold answered the searching beam of light of the daughter of Athena, who could almost see her own hope for a quick grab shrivel and die.

Once she confirmed that the faint gold she spotted with her light under the sweaty and unkempt mess of hair that reached the shoulders of their sleeping enemy, she pointed

once more the light towards the ceiling, half covering it with her hand so that the girls could have a softer source of light to see each other in order to plan.

"We need to make him move." Bianca stated the obvious without an ounce of shame, and she stared at her younger friend with a smile on her face, as if to say '*I did my part, now it's up to you*'.

Annabeth didn't consider for a single instant that the wiser option was likely to turn back and wait for effective reinforcements in the shape of a whole crew of determined and experienced demigods, so her eyes turned immediately towards their own satchels, and she made once more a quick inventory.

Soon enough, her mind parsed through the points she had made in order to achieve her objective without dying, and she turned towards Bianca: "I have a plan, but you won't like it."

AN

**Not much to say about this chapter, it was more to work on some exposition of Bianca and Annabeth's characters and instincts, as well as to round out what little is known of Charles and Hailey's thought processes.**

**I'm aware that between this and the previous chapter, the plot has slowed down considerably: but every time I set out to retrieve the damned Fleece, I feel like the ones doing so deserve more exposition.**

**In any case, the next chapter should be ready soon, and with that we get started on a much faster cadence of 'events'. I want to leave behind this booooring arc as soon as possible, but the whys and hows of many characters have remained quiet until now, and I wanted to bloat them a little before turning back to Icarus.**

**So, the next chapter (the part that is already written) actually closes the cyclops' part of the story, and sets up the trigger for the next Arc, you'll see what I mean soon.**

**Chapter 27: A quick choice**

### **A quick choice**

Annabeth had been right: Bianca didn't like the plan, she didn't like it *at all*. Or at least that will be what she'd say when asked about it.

Her hands ached, her arms occasionally trembled, and her feet were *murdering* her: following the indications of the daughter of Athena, the last demigod to join the Adamas had climbed up one of the irregular walls of Polyphemus' abode, crack after nook after cranny, Bianca had managed to bring herself just under the ceiling, and she was now in the odd position of needing to transition from the more or less secure hold she had on the stone, to the still unknown roots that had irregularly pierced the top of the cave following Charles' tune.

And of course, she had to do it all while keeping her torchlight from flashing upon the head of the sleeping cyclops, lest the sudden beam of light woke the creature before it was time, costing their chances to achieve what only Jason had accomplished.

Slowly and carefully, tucking away her torchlight after memorizing the next steps, Bianca stretched herself above the vertiginous fall in the dark until her right hand met a rough wooden surface, and already feeling the strain accumulate in her left arm, she pushed off the wall.

For a fraction of a second, she was suspended in the dark, with only a hand and the direction of her own jump to prevent her from falling to her death.

In that moment, she found herself thinking furiously at the raw dose of adventure that she had gotten since choosing to follow Icarus, and with her heart beating loudly in her chest, her breath heavy but not yet ragged, she found herself smiling in the dark: she had never felt so alive.

For every step of her ascension, she held her life in her own two hands, and every mistake could signify the end. It was thrilling in a way that completely outclassed the fear inherent in her every choice: never before had it been so clear that she could die at any moment, and she loved every second of it.

Then her push achieved what she had planned for, and the rest of her body crashed against the wood, her feet landing where she had planned and her free hand already pushing forward to the next step. After a couple of seconds, she managed to slip around the root that had punctured almost vertically the ceiling of Polyphemus' cave, and she climbed up to a more or less horizontal section of the wood, her arms trembling lightly while she took deep gulps of air.

While she rested, she looked on the floor in order to take in the situation from the safety of her position, and surely enough, she spotted the occasional appearance of Annabeth's flashlight, which she used just as sparingly while she sneaked her way up to Polyphemus' head, where they had spotted the presence of the fabled Golden Fleece.

She carefully made a knot around the root and unrolled a length of rope that led to the floor, as she'd need a quick escape route once she was done with her part of the plan, and climbing twenty meters downward in the darkness of the cave wasn't the wise way to do so.

Up there, she could only hear the constant, rumbling mess that was the cyclops' snoring, and her own breath, which passed by her lips slower and slower, until she recovered fully from the effort of the climbing. But not all of the time between Annabeth's uses of her torchlight was spent in the dark: once she decided that she had rested enough, Bianca lit her own torch and started to map out the roots that were hanging just above Polyphemus' lower half.

This part was slightly less thrilling than the climb itself, but Bianca enjoyed it too: she had to figure out a way to accomplish what Annabeth had envisioned, and a mistake here could cost more than her own life, since once the two got started with the actual theft of the Golden Fleece, there would be no time to think, and no second chances.

With the same care that she had exercised to reach the top of the wall, she moved from root to root, a couple of daggers becoming handy as she occasionally used them to stab the bark where no grips existed, so that she could move without contortions worthy of a circus, and she finally reached the roots that were placed directly above the feet of the cyclops.

Once in position, she was quick to cut deep grooves into the roots, angling them in a way that could accommodate the vials that Hailey had left them, basically turning them from random explosives into shaped charges that would, hopefully at least, make the wood fall loudly on the feet of the cyclops.

She had barely finished her work when Annabeth flashed her torchlight in the agreed manner, signaling that she was ready to act: by now, she had managed to tie a rope to the part of the Fleece that was visible beneath the coarse hair of Polyphemus, and she had likely used a combination of knots and weights to make sure that in the instant the cyclops woke, startled by the mess that Bianca would unleash, the daughter of Athena would get their prize in a manner of fractions of a second.

With a deep breath, Bianca removed herself from the explosive mess that she had readied, dragging behind a single thread that linked her to one of the vials' stopper: once she felt she was far enough from the trap, she'd spring it, and then she simply had to run back to the beginning of the cave to regroup with Annabeth and disappear before the enormous creature splattered them on the walls.

A few meters from the head of Polyphemus, Annabeth waited with her heart hammering in her chest: her left hand was hovering just over the strained rope that she had managed to tie at the Golden Fleece and an unstable rock nearby, while her right held the dagger that Luke had gifted her years before.

She had given the signal, now she only had to wait, and her hyperactive mind was determined to go over each step she'd need to return to the beginning of the cave as quickly and stealthily as she could once the Golden Fleece reached her hands.

She stood perfectly still, the forced patience of a hunter waiting to spring a trap was the only thing that kept her from fidgeting: she was thrilled beyond measure, excited beyond reason, and if there was the faintest light in the cave, she knew that her grey eyes would sparkle with joy. She was about to accomplish something that only Jason and Odysseus had achieved, she was about to become a *legend*.

This would be enough to overwrite the mess with Prometheus, and nobody on the Adamas would ever look down on her or Bianca because of their age: Odysseus of manifold wit had tricked the cyclops once, avenging the deaths of his men, who had been eaten raw by the creature. As a son of Poseidon, like all the other monsters of his ilk, Annabeth also hoped that the enormous roots would be enough to break at least one of Polyphemus' ankles, and once Icarus recovered enough of his health, it wouldn't be too hard to ask him to actually mount a war against the cyclops. *We did it for the Laestrygonians after all.*

It happened in an instant: a crackling rumble exploded above the legs of Polyphemus, and in the dark, Annabeth felt the ground tremble, both because the cyclops had jerked awake and was already lifting his head from the Golden Fleece, which darted towards the daughter of Athena with the same speed that the rock it was tied to was falling at.

And a second later, the startled groan of the just awoken cyclops turned into a pained roar.

But Annabeth was already retreating: a single slash of her dagger had been enough to cut free her prize from the rope she had readied, and with the insane precision that the mind of a daughter of Athena was capable of, she was retracing the precise sequence of steps that would lead her to the crack in the wall, and to the freedom beyond it.

She couldn't run, even with her extraordinary memory she couldn't risk falling in the dark: the uneven ground was challenge enough, but the roar of the cyclops didn't help, and neither did his frustrated punches at everything that surrounded him.

**"WHO DARES?!"** the cyclops thundered in the enclosed space of the cave, and his powerful voice echoed a thousand times across the walls and the uneven floor, striking almost like a physical blow against Annabeth's balance: she stumbled and fell, scraping the uncovered skin of her right palm on the rock before rising once more and forcing herself to maintain the calm.

Already, she could feel the Fleece's influence: her skin was healing, and she didn't feel tired: her muscles were rejuvenated, and she fancied that even in the dark, the faint golden presence of her prize was enough to show her the way.

Soon enough, she was at the crack in the wall that led to the exit, and she stopped, her eyes darting around in the dark and her ears trying to pierce that cacophony caused by the raging cyclops, she was hoping that Bianca would arrive soon, hopefully before...

**"WHAT IS THIS SMELL? A HUMAN? NO, A DEMIGOD!"** with a great movement of the air that answered to the standing of the cyclops, Annabeth understood that he was going to check the entirety of his cave.

*Before that.* she grimaced and adjusted the Golden Fleece around her shoulders, the soft weight of the warm vellum making her sigh as her body thrummed with energy: she could run without stopping for the rest of her life with that, she knew it. *C'mon Bianca, where are you?* In the chaos that Polyphemus was making, she wouldn't have heard a cry for help, or her approach. The only thing she could do...

"Well, you should run!" a hopeful voice whispered quickly.

"But what about Bianca?" a fearful tone surrounded that question, and the voice differed from the first only in the way that the image in a mirror differed from reality. She could point out that one wasn't real, but for the life of her she couldn't tell which was the true one.

Annabeth whirled on herself, giving her back to the raging cyclops and spotting immediately the one who had scared her: sitting cross-legged next to the crack in the wall that led outside, there was a boy.

He was maybe her age, dressed with tattered blue jeans and a small beige trenchcoat that reached his thighs, and with a frown, the daughter of Athena realized that she could see him clearly despite the lack of light to show his form. Only then, almost as the punchline of a joke, she did notice that the kid had two faces.

"You are lucky that he decided to not *swap* his sheep for the carnivorous ones of Gerion, you know." The face on the left smirked thoughtfully while the other kept looking around in fright.

"Who are you?" but even as she asked, she knew the answer, after all, despite his strange choice of looking like a kid with dark hair, there weren't that many myths about a two-faced being.

"You have a choice ahead of you." the face on the right, the fearful one, spoke quickly, his eyes darting around as if he was expecting an ambush at any moment: "To venture back in the cave and try to find and help Bianca, who should already have been here, or to run away with your prize."

**"THIEVES!"** the cyclops realized that the Fleece had disappeared, and the crashing of wood being slammed against unyielding rock intensified.

"Well?" Janus left face forward with a wide smile on one face and a pleading expression on the other, "Polyphemus awoke and already seeks both you and your companion. Will you run away in time to save Icarus, or will you risk it all to brave the darkness?"

The gargantuan being at the deep end of the cave roared his rage, and Annabeth shook with indecision: she had no news on Bianca, but using her torch would bring onto her the attention of the cyclops, and so she'd have to seek her out by actually searching the cave, all the while avoiding the sheep that would give away her position and the random hammering of Polyphemus, who, by the sound of things, was punching everything around him with a mad rage.

She'd be more useful to Bianca by forcing the cyclops to open the cave, and by delivering the Fleece to Icarus, who could then mount a rescue mission, after all she couldn't doubt him, not after all that he had accomplished.

"Polyphemus!" she shouted as she started to slip in the crack in the wall, "I am Annabeth, daughter of Athena, and I've stolen the Golden Fleece!"

Her voice rang across the cave and was drowned by the enraged shout of the cyclops, but the youngest member of the Adamas kept shouting as she snuck away: "I'm already leaving your cave, if you want to find me, you'll have to search the hills!"

After that she ran, ignoring the twin, distorted laughter of Janus.

Bianca had barely the time to touch the ground when Annabeth's voice rang loudly across the cave: "I'm already leaving your cave, if you want to find me, you'll have to search the hills!"

The bestial scream of rage that followed shook the very ground and sent the sheep into a panic-fueled dash towards safety: but in the darkness of the enclosed space, there was no place beyond the reach of the enraged Polyphemus. Bianca flattened herself against the nearest wall and started to move towards the only possible exit, but still she felt on her skin the vast mass of air that was being displaced by the swings of the one-eyed monster, and her nose was soon assaulted by the nauseating smell of sheep-guts and shit.

Ignoring the crackling of frail bones being turned into mush, the last demigod to join the Adamas moved as fast as she could while being sure of not running afoul of the furious Polyphemus or the dangers of the uneven ground that could cause her to sprain an ankle at the worst possible moment.

**"THIEF!"** billowed the cyclops, **"I won't fall for your trick! I can still *smell* you, demigod, and I won't open my cave so that you can run!"**

Bianca threw away the half-baked plan of hiding until Polyphemus gave her a more convenient way to escape and kept moving along the wall, roughly aware of where exactly the crack leading outside should be. Cautious as she was, she still found it strange that she managed to find a secure footing with each step: it was something she had discarded when she and Annabeth had first made use of the passage created by Charles, chalking it up to some lingering magic from the Satyr.



*Is this because of my father?* She had been explained in a rough outline how a demigod's powers could point towards their divine parent, but being able to walk in the dark didn't ring any bell to her admittedly limited knowledge of Greek Mythos.

She simply shook her head and kept moving, eager to leave behind the screaming Polyphemus, who had started to rip the roots that had pierced from atop the hill they were under, finding the addictions to his home outrageous: "**Lies and tricks!**" the cyclops screamed once more, and following an instinct that she couldn't name, Bianca flattened herself on the ground just in time for a rock the size of a horse to whistle above her head and impact loudly against the wall.

**"I feel a faint breeze! WHO DARED CREATE AN OPENING IN MY HOME?!"** three more boulders and one -thankfully already dead- sheep was flung in rapid succession, and Bianca found herself jumping left and right without truly thinking about it, the ground surprisingly accommodating to her need as she had to change direction in a split second.

As she thought she was nearing the exit, she fancied that she could almost *feel* it, like her feet knew where she wished to go, and that they were too eager to accompany her there. So she ignored the enraged scream of Polyphemus, who started to curse the name of Annabeth while he kept throwing around small boulders, chunks of wood he had ripped from the ceiling, and what was left of his flock.

Still, when one of the rocks shattered on the ground nearby, she winced because a shard of stone nicked her left arm, and she scampered back to her feet while ignoring the dull throbbing of her hands, which she had to slam against the ground in order to not break her nose on the unforgiving rock. As she rose to her feet once more, a pit of dread opened in her stomach: where before she had a vague idea of where she needed to go, the last maneuver to dodge Polyphemus' attack missed Bianca but managed to erase that faint feeling that had been guiding her.

And a part of her knew that a boulder had just been smashed against the only opening that could lead her outside. *And I think that there are sheep' guts smeared all over the wall, disgusting.*

**"Ah, is this your blood, demigod?"** a burst of positively hungry laughter thundered across the enclosed space she was sharing with the one-eyed monster, and the demigoddess cringed at the realization that now that she no longer had a planned escape, she was on her own.

Annabeth had shouted to distract the cyclops and maybe to trick him into making Bianca's escape easier, yes, but also to communicate what she was going to do to the last demigod to join the Adamas: of course, the priority had been retrieving the Fleece without fighting, as Hailey had expressly forbidden it, but from what she had been told of Icarus, he needed it as soon as possible, and given the infamous miraculous powers of the relic, *he* should be able to lend his help fairly quickly.

Ultimately however, Bianca had to decide between keep playing hide and seek with a monster capable of sniffing her blood despite the overwhelming stink of dead sheep, while he more or less randomly target her immediate surroundings with anything that fell into his hands, *or* finding another way out.

*Or*, a part of her mind whispered, *killing the monster*.

A shiver ran down her spine as the option took root in her head: shouldn't she figure out a way to kill it? Wasn't that what demigods were meant to do? As she seriously considered what had been born as a joking afterthought, she felt once more the thrill that had accompanied her during her climb in the darkness.

Bianca had never felt more alive than when she had completed her part of the plan with Annabeth, but now that she thought back on it, her body shifting on its own in the pitch-black darkness of a cave with no openings towards the outside, she felt as if a part of her was *disappointed* by how easy it had been. She had almost slipped here and there, but even when she risked it all by jumping from the wall to the root hanging from the ceiling, her grip had been steady, and while her heart hammered somewhat in her chest, she could only wish for that feeling to continue.

She dropped on the floor and prowled forward on her hands and the tip of her feet, her knees barely above the ground while the muscles of her back tensed as a bowstring: for an instant, she thought she heard a twin, dissonant laughter of crippling dread and utter joy echo nearby, but the thundering of boulders smashing against the walls quickly swallowed what had been only a trick of her mind.

She abandoned herself to her last idea without fully realizing it, and she soon was skirting by the lumbering steps of Polyphemus: in the absolute darkness of his home, she felt like she had when she decided to follow Icarus away from the Lotus Hotel, there was eagerness in her movements, and a hungry glint in the eyes that, if one were to observe closely, would have appeared like to holes into the black, swallowing more and more of what surrounded her.

The unforgiving ground trembled at the unleashed fury of the cyclops, but with each step she found herself moving with more ease, and the faint intuition that had before tried to lead her towards the exit refined itself to the point that she *knew* her surroundings with a clarity that should have been impossible.

While she moved, her heart sang in her chest, and without thinking, she darted between what she knew were the feet of the cyclops: her short sword of celestial bronze lashed out with no warning for Polyphemus, who knew she was near, but couldn't pinpoint her with precision.

"**Annabeth!**" his outraged roar rang almost painfully against Bianca's ears, and she couldn't hold back the throaty chuckle that seemed to thirst for more and more of the creature's blood: "**You've hidden my Golden Fleece! But after I eat you, I'll find it!**"

The demigod darted again, this time jumping above the left toe of the cyclops, and her sword bit deeply just under the monster's nail: it wasn't harmful, per se, but it was fucking annoying for the enormous creature. Polyphemus punched the ground next to his foot, receiving a deep stab next to his pinky's knuckle that made him jerk away instinctively.

Another pained roar shook the room, and even fully immersed in her bloodthirsty joy, Bianca frowned while she retreated a bit, gaining some breathing room: she was ecstatic at being able to wound the cyclops, but she could spend the next year covering the monster in cuts, and she'd still be unable to kill it. *Besides*, she thought, *I will still need a way to leave this place.*

Tentatively, she tried to consciously *feel* around her, and while her sixth sense informed Bianca that the roots Charles had sung into reality were keeping together the ceiling, the continuous barrage of hits that Polyphemus was forcing upon the walls was going to make everything collapse *sooner* rather than later. *I don't want to be rescued by Icarus, what's the point of an adventure if it's not mine?*

Thinking as fast as she was able to, she pitched her voice against a wall, so that it would echo without giving away her position, and she made sure to copy Annabeth's to the best of her ability: "Ha! You'll never be able to smell the Golden Fleece, because I've hidden it too well, even if you eat me, you will never find it again!"

She ran again across the cave, sneaking another cut into the cyclops' left foot, and with a grimace, she used all of her strength to lift what her sixth sense told her was a broken and dead sheep from the ground. **"Stupid demigod! The Fleece healed my eye almost completely long ago! Once I've eaten you, I'll be able to seek out my treasure!"**

Acting quickly and using the cover of Polyphemus' tantrum in answer to her last attack, Bianca slashed with her sword, separating the back of the animal's skin from the rest of its body, and she unlatched the celestial bronze armor that protected her torso. Throwing herself to the ground to avoid another boulder flying too close for it to be comfortable, she ripped away as much of the bloodied wool as she could from the dead creature before closing the carcass into her armor.

After a deep, steadying breath, she heaved the sheep's carcass over her shoulders, breathing through her mouth to tolerate the stench, and she darted one last time between the feet of the cyclops, stabbed her sword in the right heel of the creature, attempting to reach his Achilles's tendon, and left her weapon there. With a serpentine movement that had her jump just clear of Polyphemus's retaliatory punch, she left the armor-enclosed sheep behind, and despite the grossness of the sound, she smiled the creature's attack flattened the animal's carcass despite its celestial bronze protection.

**"I got you, Annabeth the liar!"** the one-eyed monster crooned as he retreated his punch and immediately scooped up the messy remains off the ground.

In complete silence, and still breathing only through her mouth, Bianca returned to where she had discarded the sheep's bloodied vellum and she quickly donned it before running towards the proper entrance of Polyphemos's cave. She almost stumbled upon a rather long splinter of wood, no doubt a result of the cyclops throwing pieces of the roots that pierced his ceiling against the stone walls, and immediately grabbed it, carefully avoiding the jagged extremities as she secured it sideways across her back.

The grotesque munching of the one-eyed monster accompanied her as she started to climb as fast as she could the nearest wall, following her sixth sense once more to find a nook where she could catch her breath while she hoped that her plan was going to work.

**"She thought she could lie to me!"** Polyphemos' rumbling laughter shook the cave as he took lumbering steps towards the immense boulder that acted as a door, **"But I've been the one to win! Ha! And as soon as I find again the Golden Fleece, satyrs and demigods will return to be eaten! AHAHAHA!"**

Without stopping in his self-congratulatory speech, the one-eyed monster pushed open the entrance of his cave, and the faint light of the fading moon and stars, coupled with the dawn that was starting to sing in the East, immediately shone into the previously pitch black cave.

Bianca silently left behind her hiding place while she discarded the bloodied vellum that had temporarily hidden her smell from Polyphemos, and soon she was in position above what passed for an archway for the cyclops' cave: "Polyphemos!"

At her call, the one-eyed monster began to turn, a startled shout rumbling out of his throat.

With her heart hammering in her chest, and an eager grin stretching over her features, she threw herself from the top of her high position.

With a blood-soaked shirt, and sturdy pants tucked into brown leather boots that were marred with sheep guts, only her bronze vambraces glinted from the faint light present under the sky, but as she fell towards her enemy, her hands readied the long splinter of wood.

She let out a high cry of triumph at the widening of the scarred eye of Polyphemos, and her heart seemed to soar in joy when she felt the jagged length of wood slip perfectly into the pupil of the monster while her boots slammed hard against its already bloodied iris.

To avoid the instinctive swatting motion of the already-crying monster, she twisted, breaking her makeshift spear into his enemy's eye while she was at it, and she jumped back towards the nearest wall, her eyes flaring open as she sought a way to not simply slam against the unforgiving rock only to fall to her death.

Her calculations were a bit off however, as the flailing of Polyphemus clipped her sill extended legs and sent her spiraling towards the lush grass that covered the side of the hill: she landed on the downward slope with a sickening \*crack\* in her left arm, and her body rolled limply until it met the plain ground.

Juiced up on adrenaline, Bianca jumped to her feet and run, ignoring as much as she could the broken left arm that she cradled with her right.

Behind her, Polyphemus let out another bestial roar as he stumbled around, slamming by mistake against the rocky entrance of his cave, which, after all the abuse it had endured, finally gave in and began to collapse. Blinded once more, Bianca was able to fall into a steady rhythm as she made her way back to the beach.

She was exhausted, wounded, and filthier than she had ever thought possible: but her success burned brightly in her chest, beating like a second heart, and so she kept running, the smile on her face looking like the edge of a blade.

**AN**

**A bit more character development of both Bianca and Annabeth, as well as the return of our old friend Janus, which I decided to keep popping around for the rest of this part of the fic, only to massively underline when a moment is so important it will have far-reaching consequences.**

**As you see there is a bit of incongruence between how I showed him to Annabeth's eyes, and how he looked like to Icarus back in chapter 16, that is still part of the solution I'm building to differentiate how each demigod, or mortal, for that matter, perceives the divine, which is something that annoyed me back when I read Percy Jackson, given that the target for that novels just pre-teen or early-teen kids.**

**Besides a few moments, I wanted more *Gravitas* in Riordan's books, something that it's hard to achieve when the Valhalla is reduced to a hotel and Atlas to a dumb-brute.**

**So, how did the chapter go? I know you're all more interested in Icarus, but I cannot hope to manage a story of this magnitude without some screen-time dedicated to other characters, and I wanted to give something to Annabeth and Bianca to make them *more* than landscape for the MC. I may be too late for that, but I'll eventually do the same with Thalia and... others. You'll see.**

**This is what the previous chapter had been building up for, I hope I didn't disappoint.**

**The rhythm of the events in the previous current and following chapter is the true experiment I wanted to play with, and better to place it now at the end of the**

**Odyssey Arc than in the next ones, in which there is a fuckton of stuff going on with a very strict timeline.**

**Addition 05-23-22:**

**The second part of the chapter is to start up Bianca's growing powerset along with adding some of the 'thrill' that I forgot to inject in originally: I've realized only now, but in my haste to get the story going I put no hesitation whatsoever at any point when Bianca was climbing in the dark, and not nearly enough build-up for the brief scene with Janus.**

**It's a pity because I wanted to use the previous chapter to make those two 'important' somewhat to you readers, and I know that having Annabeth take the Fleece instead of Icarus (when that's the main purpose behind the Odyssey arc) felt kind of hollow: but this chapter is the why.**

**Still, even when he's not openly recognized, I hope I managed to make Janus' intervention meaningful in this chapter. And before any accuses me of making Bianca OP: she *is* Hades's kid. She has the same potential of Percy and Thalia and Nico, without the characteristical dumbness of the first, the crippling fear of heights of the second, or the kind of traumatized existence of the third.**

**Plus, she'd underground during this fight, which is the equivalent of the sea for Percy Jackson. Besides, she *did* become a huntress in canon, and I really wish that there was something more to Artemis's group of hunters than being a virgin female.**

**Also, I try to stay far away from monologuing and stupid villains, as you know by how I've reworked Atlas and Prometheus, but Polyphemus is actually described as a savage, so I have no objections to maintaining the actually classic idiocy of the mythological monster.**

**The fight with Polyphemus should have opened the next chapter, but that started to stretch to 8k words, and it felt a bit disjointed, so I moved the fight here, where some good old action was sorely needed.**

**So, as always, Opinions? Hopes?**

**(also, I've got a few Marvel fics going on, and my approach to the Norse pantheon is a bit more Mythical than the one of the movies, so if you like how I deal with divinity and whatnot, you're likely to enjoy those works too)**

I'm reminding everyone that I've got my personal website where you can drop off a donation if you have the means and will to do so, and where you can download most of my fanfiction in a pdf format: cloud9stories dot net.

## Chapter 28: The Price of Defiance

**I've updated the previous chapter, read the second half of that before this one!**

### The price of defiance

17th December 2002

I awoke with a breath filling my lungs until it felt I was about to explode, immediately followed by an overreaching *pressure* all around me, forcing me together, uncomfortably keeping whole what was slowly falling into pieces. And with that breath, and only after I managed to dominate my first choked scream as I refused to fall back into the unconsciousness that I came from, my other senses returned.

The pressure on my back as I rested in my bed, the constant breathing of the sea that matched the faint tilting of the *Adamas*, the smell of wood and cotton and bronze, and when I opened my eyes, the familiar sight of my cabin, my weapon resting in its holding rack, and gold fur wrapped around me. Nothing about my circumstances could however explain the incessant hammering of my heart in my chest, the tightness of my throat as I swallowed hollowly.

Then, as if by miracle, I recognized the emotions that I could taste on my tongue: *fear*, crippling, rumbling fear that was barely held back by something resembling elation.

*I have been dying until this moment.* The realization fell on me like iced water, making me unconsciously tense my muscles and grit my teeth as I jumped to my feet, dislodging the strange gold fur that had been placed over me.

As soon as I was standing, I felt vanish the renewed strength that had managed to push back the devious falling apart that had stopped me from setting foot on Polyphemus' island: and with a glance to the bed, I realized what I had been placed under wasn't some random magical fur, but the one and only Golden Fleece. It was positively *brimming* with life, an energy taht couldn't be truly defined filling me.

I quickly grabbed it and donned it over my naked torso, making sure that it wouldn't be dislodged by mistake, and immediately I felt my heart rate slow down and steadiness return to my limbs. I breathed deeply, taking looking around myself with a sight that felt new: the magic, cybernetic eye built by David with his unholy combination of science

and semi-divine might offer me a vision that melded with no issues or discrepancies with what my organic eye could see, and as I thought that, I felt like gagging.

*I lost an eye, and I didn't even falter.* I felt myself shiver uncontrollably at the memory of *Κάμπη*, of Kampe, and the widespread fire that we caused into the heart of San Francisco. I felt it against my skin then, hovering, barely there, the weight of the polearm that David had originally assembled for me: hungry, judging, and *eager*.

"I recruited Dedalus, and I missed the death of Pan." I murmured to myself: I remembered everything that had happened, every action that I had taken since the beginning of this Odyssey of mine into the Sea of Monsters, but those actions had the same weight on me of those made in a dream. I had lost people in the very first storm that the Adamas had faced, the battle against the sea that properly baptized us as a crew and our vessel as something worthy of legend.

With the Vellum across my shoulders, I felt properly *human* since my last chat with Hestia: I stood still, a maelstrom of emotions rising and falling in pieces around me: there was a muted guilt for the carelessness through which I had led the others, there was still that over compassing *fear* that tinged my every breath with the awareness that I had been dying, with the instinctive understanding that the Vellum was only holding back the inevitable.

*What did Janus say?* I recalled the conversation I had with the two-faced god, who had spoken to me in riddles that nevertheless appeared so clear at the time, and I forced myself to breathe deeply.

"How hypocritical." only now I noticed it: for all of my distaste for the gods, for all of their ubiquitous selfishness in treating mortals as nothing but tools, I had done the very same with all those that I dragged on this mad venture: I couldn't even remember the names of those died in the first storm, and there was an utter *lack of care* about them.

I cared about Thalia, somewhat about Charles, Hailey, Annabeth, and Abigail, but I hadn't hesitated in leaving the latter behind on my island when I understood that she'd be a hindrance. I swallowed hollowly as I thought about Bianca, who I had more or less manipulated so that she'd leave behind her less useful brother and follow me with the same dedication she'd have otherwise wasted on Artemis.

*Hell, I even miss Luke.* I grimaced at the memory of our last encounter, and while I still felt like I had been right to be enraged at his pathological need for his father's approval, which led to the mission to the Hesperids' Garden, brawling with him had been excessive.

I had been dying, I still was, and if I were to listen to Janus' words: it was because my Name had grown too much for my body to bear: at least that was what I could take away from that conversation. The Fleece gave me strength, and given its legendary status even among other fabled artifacts, if I kept it on long enough it'd probably reinforce my body



to better bear my very *self*. The golden vellum sat lightly over my shoulders, but it almost felt like a net *capturing me*.

Immediately, a part of me that I knew all too well *pushed*: the mantra of freedom humming heavily in my veins as it recognized the Fleece only as something that prevented me from reaching further and further, until I could only fall apart into cosmic dust.

With a momentary hesitation, I lifted my right hand and grabbed my weapon: the shaft felt smooth and warm under my fingers, the grain of the wood almost welcoming as I turned towards the entrance of my cabin, only for my eyes to land on the small chest that still housed the dagger-like fang that was our spoil of the Hydra.

I didn't even glance at the unsettling presence that seemed to lightly exude from another wooden chest: one that I knew held the pauldron-shaped relic that was instead the result of our killing of Kampe.

With a shrug, I opened it and secured the dangerous weapon in a thick leather casing over the small of my back, and once I felt ready to face the world, I left the cabin moving quickly, and with an energy that I knew was temporarily borrowed from the Fleece, I soon reached the main Galley of the *Adamas*, which seemed to be housing *everyone*.

"Icarus!" the shouts were almost overwhelming to my renewed senses, so I plastered a strained smile over my face at the wave of joy that my crew so freely showed at my newly found health. *How am I supposed to deal with this?*

The Galley was still as I remembered it: the brazier of Hestia burned warmly in the middle of a long table, while electrical lights strategically placed kept the area well lit. The wood of the *Adamas* was of a light brown coloration, and the benches -which like everything else were secured on the floor so as to not be smacked around by a stormy sea- hosted most of my crew. Some stood however, passing around large jugs of wine or already filled cups. I could name each one of my people, of course, but only a few faces commanded my full attention.

Hailey, whose expression of worry was only marginally held back by Hestia's flames, and Charles, whose deep brown eyes had a weight to them that I found novel.

Then my eyes landed on a deeply concerned Annabeth hovering around an exhausted Bianca, who had her left arm in a cast and an ankle secured in a tight mess of bandages. I ignored the many scratches that she sported, focusing instead on the slightly sunken eyes, and a complexion that was paler than what it should have been: "What happened?"

Slowly, but with a distinct air of unbridled *pride* about her, Bianca gifted me a smile: and with that expression, she completely overwrote whatever memory I ever had of her. She had been a perfectly pliable, eager girl with an unexpressed lust for adventure. Now she

was a demigod fully aware that she could walk the line between reality and impossibility with her head held high and a steady footing.

The tale was told as cups of red wine were passed around: Annabeth began when Hailey finished her introduction, during which she subtly nagged at the dog-eat-dog attitude that everyone fell into once I was fully incapacitated, only to leave the ending to Bianca herself.

And what end it was, "So Annabeth, for the first time without supervision, snagged away the Golden Fleece that saved my life, and the first time Bianca actually set foot into our world, she ended up blinding Polyphemus worse than Ulysses himself!" I rose my cup of wine and was immediately matched by everyone else: "To Annabeth and Bianca, youngest members of the Adamas!"

"To Annabeth and Bianca!" in the perfectly sized Galley, our voices rang loudly over each other, and while Annabeth blushed, she simply tilted her head upwards, drinking in the praise that she fully deserved. Bianca on the other hand, simply maintained her faint smile, her eyes growing darker for a brief instant before the light of the room reasserted itself. *It would be nothing, if not for her parentage.*

While I was wondering about the merits of revealing Hades as Bianca's father, I ate and drank with an abandon that felt utterly *new*, while my mind already began going over what I could possibly need to not depend on the Fleece in order to survive.

Eventually one of the others came to me and asked, with bloodlust in her eyes and a smile that was just shy of a knife's edge: "We waited only because it was obvious that you were recovering, when will we try to conquer this island too?" and just like that, I was again the focus of everyone.

"Waited?" I asked, "What day is it?"

"Only a couple of weeks," somehow sensing my unease, Hailey was quick to answer, "Today is the 17h... what do you want to do?"

I took a second to munch on that piece of information before deciding what to do. *It's not like we can't return here if we need to... and Thalia has waited enough.*

"We have what we came from." I shook my head and left the galley, curtly shot down the proposal only to quickly climb to the deck and to the helm of the Adamas, where I secured my weapon in an apposite nook that had been readied in the sturdy wood, and took a deep breath.

My people followed me, and I smiled again at all of them, and this time it felt a bit more genuine, my eyes remained for a fraction longer on my true friends, which were Charles and Hailey, locking also with Annabeth who was helping a limping, exhausted Bianca. Her grey eyes were steely, since she had heard my words, but as if she didn't truly

believe them. *I dragged together this whole madness to revive Thalia as soon as possible, does she truly believe I would ignore it now that we have what we need?*

I released my deep breath in a shout that rang across the deck, reverberating on the impossibly sturdy wood of the *Adamas* like some war drum: "Set sail! We make straight for Camp Half-Blood: a friend there has been living as a pine-tree, and in her place, I would have died of boredom three times already!"

Hailey and Charles immediately started moving, followed by all the others after a second or two of hesitation. In a matter of minutes, the *Adamas* had turned following the lead of the helm in my right hand, while in my left, I held the oddly peculiar compass that was the result of David's learning under Prometheus. The needle could find several locations, all had been added since we won the Laestrygonians, using something of each place to set up the 'resonance' or some shit that David assured me I didn't need to understand.

The pyxida hadn't seen much use after my first stint in the Labyrinth, but then again, it was a tool to lead us where we had already been, and our exploration of the Sea of Monsters couldn't be planned any more than one could convince Zeus to stop siring bastards. The magical compass was akin to a pocket watch made of celestial bronze, and I marveled at it in a way that felt as *new* as everything else. Back in the Labyrinth, it hadn't been *uniquely* useful, but now that the *Adamas* rose in open waters, no good for nothing god could divert our journey, and there would be no more islands before we reached our destination.

Of course, that thought reached me just as the waves started to buck up and the clouds ahead began to darken. *Oh, come on...*

There was a brief chain of flashes as lightning discharged itself in the quickly approaching mass of darkening clouds, that looked more and more like a cover of lead ready to fall over us than mere vapor had any right to.

"Icarus?"

I took my eyes away from the incoming storm to focus on Annabeth, who had snuck up on me while I was distracted by the incoming threat: at my inquisitive gaze, the daughter of Athena spoke quickly, tucking her blond hair behind her ears, revealing the glint of gold on her earlobes: "Before you woke, I got to talk Bianca about the underworld, and since we can't perform the rites for those that fall overboard, I got the idea..."

"Of using Charon's tithe as earrings?" I connected the dots without holding back my smile: "What is better, to be held on this side of the Styx, looking for a way to escape, or to be sent ahead and be judged?"

The girl openly gaped at my words, disbelieving that I would actually consider waiting with Achilles for the rest of eternity instead of taking my chances with Hades and his posse. Before she could go on a tangent, I eyed the incoming storm with a critical eye:

we had seen others just like that, generally, when we saw them coming, it meant that they weren't specifically trained on the *Adamas*, but one could never be sure. "I'll need to feel the waves..."

"Bend down so I can pierce your ears!" Annabeth's voice rang just as the first rumble of thunder reached our vessel, and with a sigh, I locked the helm in place and lent myself to the new experience the daughter of Athena insisted on offering.

"How did you even modify the drachmas to act as earrings?" I asked curiously as she handed me the gold before unsheathing a suspiciously pointy dagger, "And are you actually intending on using that dagger to pierce my ears?" I held up one of the two coins, noting that on the edges they had been grafted a simple small hook, always made of gold.

"Gold is quite pliable, you know? Melts at very low temperatures, even if the drachmas have some magic of their own, and they don't melt quite so easily, but there was plenty of random pieces of gold on board, and the brazier in the galley was more than enough for..."

"Wait," I interrupted Annabeth only partially because of her *know-it-all* tone: "you used the fire lit with one of Hestia's embers to prepare the coins?"

"Well, yes." she seemed off-kilter because of my question, "Is it important? We were in the Galley when this idea came to us... and did you really not think to ask anyone why they had two drachmas as earrings or necklaces or whatever?" she tugged at her Camp Half-Blood necklace to show off the two drachmas that had been added to the black bead with a single bolt of lightning that symbolized Thalia's arrival at Camp, years before.

I smiled with only a hint of a grimace as I lowered myself so that Annabeth could better reach my left ear: "As I've come to realize recently, I haven't been the most observant of people when it came to this crew. Can we discuss where I'm getting them?"

In the end, we settled for two holes on my left ear, and with a brief, *sharp* sting of pain I noticed that Annabeth had surprisingly firm hands when it came to stabbing me: "Oh, don't be a baby now." she *actually* reprimanded me while spreading a small healing salve on the bleeding skin, "Take a cube of ambrosia, it'll heal within the day."

I snorted despite myself: somehow, the light wounds stung in a way that felt... *different*. However, before I could unpack the many differences that I kept noticing between my state of being previous to the donning of the Golden Fleece, the artefact made its influence known once more, and the minor wounds healed at speeds that could not be believed.

Noticing that, Annabeth let out a low whistle: "I could believe that the Fleece is capable of healing Thalia."

"Right?" I grinned back at the girl and returned to the helm, my eyes shifting to the slightly choppy waters and the low howl of the wind: "Think about all the stories you can tell her, and the adventure you basically completed on your own."

"Well," and here came out the false modesty that I remembered in a much more innocent girl that had tried to figure out the meaning behind my Thyrsus, "I wasn't alone... but I guess Thalia will be happy to..."

Before she could finish the phrase, a wave came out of nowhere and slammed sideways against the hull of the *Adamas*: following the meaning of her name, the ship's wood didn't even groan in protest, but I held onto my feet only because my hands were closed on the helm, many others on the deck were thrown on their knees as I pushed with all the strength my back against the unexpected current that tried to bare our flank to the incoming front of the storm.

Still, busy as I was, I witnessed Annabeth being flung off her feet, impacting the bulwark, and landing in the churning waves beneath.

The storm had jumped the last stretch that separated us with a speed that could be only achieved through divine intervention, and while my mind was still trying to process the *impossibility* that I just witnessed, along with the crash of too-tall waves against the sides of my ship, there was a haunting peal of laughter surrounding us, as if the entire purpose of the storm had already been achieved.

AN

**As for Annabeth, I wanted exactly this plot twist, and I'll endeavor to quickly complete the next chapter, in which a few loose strands will come together.**

**We already see the miraculous effects of the Fleece on our Dying Icarus, as with his POV I clarify some of the 'uncaring' attitudes that he had regarding his own more or less imminent death, while I start to build up some more meaningful connections between him and characters that have been more or less one-dimensional supporting roles up to this moment.**

## **Chapter 29: Matching Defiance**

### **Matching Defiance**

Hailey held onto the railings as the next wave battered the *Adamas*, almost flinging her into the churning waters below: but even the jarring impact wasn't enough to take her eyes away from the *absence* on the deck. Annabeth had been there, next to Icarus while the storm thundered closer and closer, and in less than a second, everything changed.

The stormy waves had appeared out of nowhere, and the exasperating daughter of Athena, the little girl who had just achieved the impossible along with Bianca, was *gone*. Annabeth, the girl that in her hubris had freed Prometheus, only to stick out her punishments like a champ, the too-prideful *child* that had snuck out to help against the Hydra, was no longer on the ship.

Annabeth, who had just found a friend in Bianca as an equal, had been taken by the Sea. *How unjust.*

Icarus had likely just thought the same things, only faster, as he was already roaring his rage against the storm, helm in one hand, his chosen weapon in the other, and the Golden Fleece still draped around his naked shoulders, but unexpectedly, he wasn't screaming incoherently, as clear words left his lips, precise like the lightning that was drawing stark white lines across the grey expanse of the storm, and loud enough to rival the booming thunder: "SHOW YOURSELF!"

Lightning flashed once more in the dark skies above the *Adamas*, and under the irregular lights, everything seemed to be colored in shades of dirt white. In a moment, the storm seemed to *heed* the rage in Icarus' voice, the waves stilled as if physically pushed back by something heavier than them, and a water sprout appeared in front of the ship, shaking everything once more with the spray of salt water.

Hailey held on to dear life as she tasted the sea on her lips, and her eyes widened impossibly at what followed: from the water sprout, as if from an unholy mockery of a flower opening its petals under the sun, emerged *something*, and the daughter of Hypnos swallowed hollowly as she immediately realized that this was no sea monster, no hurdle that the *Adamas* could simply push through.

No, divinity rolled off the creature in waves that rivaled the storm, and the water took the form of a ten meters tall woman, seafoam churned violently forming a chiton around her shape, while waters impossibly deep shifted violently as her own skin: under an untamable mass of hair that whipped violently like living tentacles of a jellyfish, her eyes were two whirlpools that seemed ready to swallow everything just above a smile that was simply too wide to be anything but a threat. Her bared teeth had the same look as pearls, but they were razor-sharp, and all pointed.

**"And who are you to order me around?"** the voice that fell from the being's lips was echoed by an increased rolling of the waves, while the *Adamas* was held still as if in the hand of an impossibly vast giant, only for a chuckle to follow: her laughter was mocking, and it sounded like wood shattering on the rocks, like waves striking against the earth and each-other with a power impossible to define, **"Of course, even in my exile I've heard of you, and of your repeated defiance... never before my father lowered himself to directly *ask* me to break a single ship."**

"I felt you in other storms, before." Icarus was no longer shouting, but his rage had instead just turned into something colder and pointed: Hailey could see it in how he was still clutching his weapon, "But never like this."

**"We had fun, did we not?"** the goddess laughed again, and the sound seemed to ring directly against the bones of the demigods on the *Adamas*, **"You should have been born millennia ago, *Icarus*, our battles would have eclipsed the tale of Odysseus, or the Fall of Troy."**

Something in how she said the captain's name felt inordinately intimate, as if she knew him since forever, as if she understood exactly who she was talking with.

"WHO ARE YOU!?" perhaps with more bravery than common sense, Hailey found herself screaming at the storm made flesh in front of the ship, her left hand clenching convulsively on one of the sails' ropes while the other was over her short sword: as if she could do anything against the goddess in front of them. And who was the father she mentioned?

The unholy mockery of a smile seemed to twist the lips of the creature, who eyed the daughter of Hypnos like a tsunami might observe a piece of wood drifting in front of it: **"You haven't realized it yet? Are you sure you want to know?"**

Like a current of the deep dragging you under, her alluring tone felt like a vice clamping over the frail bodies of the demigods: instinctively, despite the obvious threat she represented, Hailey couldn't help but bare her teeth in turn, unsheathing her sword as if it could do anything against the divine being in front of them.

Before the unholy body created out of the storm that surrounded them could speak again, Icarus intervened, his vast knowledge allowing him to put together what to other looked like an uneven collection of random facts: "She is *Kymopoleia*, goddess of the violent storm."

**"And much more than that:"** the goddess's eyes were ready to swallow the whole world as she spoke, **"I am ship-wrecker, fleet-sinker, and shore-eater!"** with each title she gave, her figure seemed to grow taller, her voice louder, to the point that it seemed that the waves themselves spoke in echoing crashes against the groaning hull of the ship.

Almost tauntingly, the goddess placed a single finger on the fox figurehead of the *Adamas*, and the wood that had sustained countless storms before *exploded*. In less than a spit second, with the crackle of lightning and the deeper sound of bursting splinters, the ship that had been named 'Invincible' surrendered to the divinity in *Kymopoleia*'s finger.

As all demigods, Hailey wasn't unfamiliar with an uneven fight: but this wouldn't be a fight. They were all on a ship that was basically held between the thumb and the index of a being that transcended their understanding, in the very heart of her power. Without her

consent, she felt her hold on her sword tremble, accompanied by an unfamiliar feeling rising in her gut.

*Fear.* She realized what it was only when her fingers didn't manage to hold onto her sword, which clattered on the wooden deck of the Adamas. There was no hope of fighting back...

"I thought Olympus had declared the Adamas to be off limits from the gods' direct intervention?" Icarus tried to stall for time, his mismatched eyes steely as he thought furiously of a way out. Hailey almost let out a burst of hysterical laughter: even him, surely, couldn't think of having any hope of victory?

**"Annabeth Chase dared reveal her name, and Polyphemus prayed to our father with his last breath to avenge him."** once more, the goddess let out a peal of laughter that was accompanied by the freezing spray of salt water, **"None will gainsay him: he isn't here, after all... Athena will find nothing to use against him when it was his estranged daughter to avenge her poor one-eyed brother..."**

I looked in the eyes of the goddess in front of us, blinking the salt water out of them as my left arm strained to hold onto the helm: even still as we all were, held aloft by the will of Kymopoleia, the Adamas was assaulted by countless contrasting currents, as if a piece of meat being fought over by starved wolves.

*I held the sky, this is nothing.* With the Fleece constantly renewing my might, I could hold off the inevitable end of the current conflict, for a time at least.

Since her appearance, I understood that she was beyond us: here, in the heart of a storm created by her with the full focus and might of her domain, there would be nothing I could do, and I wasn't eager to test my ability to breathe underwater in waters controlled by such a violence-loving being.

And just as that thought clicked in my head, her name gained that meaning that I couldn't grasp a moment before: **Kymopoleia.**

I knew it better than I knew myself, I understood it, and her, with the same certainty that allowed me to look Atlas in the eyes, and bargain with him as an equal. Where the titan's character had been complexity wrapped around a straightforward determination, defining him as a prideful, steadfast being, the goddess that had just taken Annabeth was, at the end of the day, violence for violence's sake.

And for all of its horrible meaning, I understood her with uncanny ease. The joy that she felt with being herself, estranged from her family, scorned, feared and hated, was the same joy I reached when I accomplished something greater than what had been achieved before, or when I did something *new*, that no story ever sang about.



In comparison to Atlas or even myself, she was truly the definition of a one-dimensional character. Then again, my first instinct was to attack her and hope for the best: even now, with my mind churning furiously to find a solution, the arm holding my weapon was trembling with barely restrained eagerness. With the Fleece rejuvenating me constantly, I felt like I could do it. *And what a story it could make.*

I shook my head to rid my eyes of the spray of seawater that climbed from my right along with my mad impulses. I frowned as I was still unused to the weight of the two drachmas that clicked one against the other on my left ear, only to focus on all I knew of Kymopoleia: daughter of Poseidon and Amphitrite, she had been cast from the court of the King of the Sea because of her violent, chaotic behavior, and married to Briares as a prize because he had defended Olympus. *Just like he is now defending my island.*

Suddenly, Hermes' words echoed in my head: his obscure hints, back at the Lotus Island, suddenly made sense. Disregarding the part where the Messenger God had warned me of Poseidon's rage before we even reached Polyphemus, I was now in front of a fight that I couldn't win.

*There are other ways to fight.* "Truly, you are the most dangerous being to ever roam the seas!"

Hailey's head whipped towards me along with the stunned expressions of the other members of the crew, and Kymopoleia let out a delighted chuckle at my words: **"Platitudes won't save you, Icarus, and stalling for time won't bring you any divine aid: my father can at least hide what happens in the storms from the pesky eyes of Olympus."**

I felt a shiver when she spoke my name: she eyed me knowingly, and in the swirling madness that was the whirlpools she had instead of eyes, I found that same understanding. I was the defiance to her neverending violence: she was the romantic beauty of the primal storms: she was what defined a hard limit that men couldn't overcome, and I was the tip of the spear meant to pierce right through it.

*Equals and opposites.* I let out a chuckle of my own: "If you sink my ship, kill me along with my crew, who will be left to fight you above the waves?" my tone wasn't afraid, the moment she decided that I was fearing her, I would be just like all the other people she sunk and drowned since her birth, it couldn't be allowed.

I raised my weapon and pointed it slightly to the side: "Who is left but me, capable of sailing through your storms? Who is left, but my crew, to witness your might? Surely not the King of the Sea, who cast you from his home, because he couldn't match your magnificence when it came to the storms you summon."

A frown appeared in the deep blue courses of choppy waters that described the goddess's face, and her predatory smile dimmed a bit, covering part of her pearly-white, needle-like fangs.

She was of violence, and relished in the terrified awe of those she destroyed, because only in death could the mere mortals come to understand what she truly stood for: she was the battle that couldn't be won. At sea, she was the looming threat of the unknown given form, implacable, unavoidable... except for those sailors capable enough to escape her little games, just to keep enough wits to swear off the sea and spread the tale.

She had told me herself: we had fun together. That was all that there was to her: fun in the overwhelming violence she could exert, fun in the fear she could taste on the sailors about to drown, fun in the vessels about to sink. And I knew that I felt a unique form of delight with bringing the *Adamas* through the storms that would have surely killed a mortal sailor.

"Your brother has been avenged." I openly lied, as I knew perfectly well that it had been Bianca, not Annabeth, to kill the cyclops, and I rested my weapon by my side as I kept talking: "And now you hold in your hands the *Adamas*, the ship that sailed through countless storms before... and nobody will ever know about it, because there will be none to talk about this, and we're hidden from the eyes of Olympus right now."

One of her hands clenched spasmodically while she let out a deep snarl: again, it sounded like the unholy combination of keeps snapping and too-tall waves crashing against a rocky shore.

"But I have a proposal." I ignored the accusing eyes of the crew who thought I was ignoring Annabeth's death: I couldn't, wouldn't allow her to go without fighting back. Already, I was acutely aware of the absence of the chipper, holier-than-you attitude of the blonde girl, of the *child* that had truly no business in being on the *Adamas*.

As that particular plan took shape in the background of my mind, I felt myself swell with new energy: it was something truly worthy of my naturally defiant inclination, something that spoke to me on a deep level. Annabeth was gone before her time because of my interference, and I would fix it.

After a minute during which even the storm around us stood quiet, looking almost like some surreal picture of a reality that was far away, Kymopoleia clacked her teeth angrily, producing a sound that was like the cracking of ice: "**Speak your proposal, Icarus.**"

"**Kymopoleia**," I spoke pushing all of my understanding of just who she was and who she represented into the Name, a name that was familiar to me like my own hands, and I saw her perk up at the sound of my voice, "We have an island amidst the Sea of Monsters: I offer a temple on the rocky cliff, where only waves created by you can reach, where you can meet with your husband, Briares, who we have freed from Kampe."

"**Such a weakling he must have become, to turn to mortals for help.**" she idly toyed with a strand of her jellyfish-like hair, as if she wasn't interested, "**I'm not interested in**

**that obedient dog, husband or not. Kill him, and I'll accept a temple where you can sacrifice his heads in my name!"**

I didn't even feign to think about that proposal: "He is much more than what you know, without him, we couldn't have slain the favored daughter of Tartarus."

**"So it's true... yes, I can feel her fire on your weapon."** I could tell that despite herself, the goddess was loving the mention of that violent battle, **"You razed half of San Francisco for that fight!"**

"I intend to sail for a long time still," I gestured with the weapon that I had buried into the flesh of Kampe, "but I and mine will need a safe harbor, and I'm not above believing your father capable of sinking the whole island: in exchange for the temple, I'd ask you to defend our home from the King of the Sea."

We remained in silence for several instants, each feeling as long as an hour, before she nodded to herself.

**"Done."** she flicked a dismissive hand in a random direction, and the waves parted as if in a funnel: **"Go and build my temple, Icarus..."**

"We should exchange three things, as it is a powerful number." I stopped her, and I strained with all the muscles of my back to hold the helm of the Adamas: "I'll sail again and again, and we'll clash above the waves time and time again: I can offer songs that describe your terrifying might. Wherever I and mine go, we'll spread the tale of **Kymopoleia**, goddess of the violent storm."

**"You already promised me that!"** she rose several meters above her position, preparing to strike down the whole ship: **"I will not have you mock me!"**

"I promised a temple for your protection of the island against your father!" I shouted back, my voice feeble in comparison to hers. Luckily, it was still heard, and made her hesitate, "To spread the songs and tales wherever we go is another matter entirely!"

Again, she remained silent for several seconds that felt like an eternity, and while something in her presence was still weighing against my crew, keeping them from interfering, I knew that she wouldn't sink us. Impatient as she was, she wanted her name to be whispered with frightened tones, and what I offered appealed to her in a way that nothing else could. I was already focused on the next steps, as the entirety of the exchange was ready in my mind. How could it not, when I understood the entirety of her name?

"For tales and songs to be spread every time we land, I ask you return Annabeth Chase to us!" my voice was steady despite the choking gasp of Hailey and the confused mutterings of others. After all, I didn't even stoop to remember the names of those we had lost in the very first storm we faced, before our very first meeting with Prometheus.

"**A dead girl for tales and songs?**" the goddess didn't bother hiding her confusion as she tilted her head, the gesture casually inhuman as her eyes stood aligned vertically and her hair kept whipping about, as if trapped in her personal hurricane, "**Done.**"

A wave crashed on the side of the ship with enough strength to make my knees buckle, and Annabeth's body was tossed at my feet like the worthless sack of flesh it undoubtedly was in the goddess' eyes. With greed in the whirlpools that her eyes were, she asked: "**What third exchange do you propose, Icarus Kampe-Slayer?**"

I hesitated for a moment, my eyes focused on the limp weight in my arm: still holding my weapon, it had been difficult to take her body in the crook of my elbow, but she was so small that I managed. As my eyes searched, I couldn't find any sign of life on Annabeth's body, but more importantly, the drachmas earrings like the ones she had just coaxed me into wearing were gone.

I took a deep breath and clenched my teeth: it wasn't the time.

"Birares once forged the weapons that are now the symbols of the power of the Kings of the Sky, the Sea, and the Underworld." I spoke at a normal tone of voice, not giving away just how much I was gambling on the gods' natural inclination to always seek more power, more followers, more riches: "If you make it so that the Adamas reaches Camp Half-Blood as soon as possible, unseen by Olympus, I'll plead Briares to consider the forging of a new weapon, for you."

An instant later, she was gone from the front of the ship, and she was floating above the wood of the Adamas, right next to me and quite human-sized: "**Three exchanges were proposed... but I know better than to trust the world of the man who tricked Circe: I'll have your oath on the Styx for this.**"

Feeling the crushing currents that were trying to tear the Adamas apart recede, I left the helm, that stood still while I observed the unearthly beauty that stood in front of me: with all of her alien features, which were all frightening on their own, I couldn't help but feel humbled: majestic didn't even come close to describe her.

And so, I swore on the Styx.

Hailey could hardly believe what she had just witnessed: the sky boomed when Icarus swore on the Styx, and before she could blink, the Adamas was rocketing on the crest of the biggest wave she had ever witnessed in first person.

The sky was still covered by leaden clouds that were run through by powerful strikes of lightning, the sea was still a chaotic, violent mess that escaped human understanding, but now they were mere spectators instead of the main target. The ocean seemed to slip them by as the wave forged by the agreement struck between the captain of the Adamas and

the estranged daughter of Poseidon carried them forth: the ears were still assaulted by the rumble of thunder and the crashing of masses of water too vast to quantify.

And yet the oppressive feeling that had nailed her tongue to the roof of her mouth was now gone, the certainty of death had she dared butt in the conversation between Icarus and Kymopoleia had vanished, as fleeting as the spray of seawater that now reached just beyond the bulwark of the Adamas. *What did I just witness?*

Apparently, the captain of the vessel had managed it one more time. The impossible had taken place just under her eyes, she had heard every word, and still she was disbelieving.

She took a tentative step on the deck that was now as steady as if they were still moored at home, and retrieved the sword that had fallen from her limp fingers when the utter dread the goddess inspired had turned her legs into lead and her will into a wet string. For a moment or two, she simply held the weapon, not truly seeing the length of celestial bronze in her hands.

"Hailey, I need you here!" Icarus' voice made her snap her head towards him: he was staring straight into her own eyes, and for a moment, she had the feeling that she knew exactly all that she had been thinking.

She watched her body move as if it didn't belong to her until she stood by the side of the Adamas' captain, when his words and sheer presence managed to snap her fully awake: "Hold the helm like this."

He secured the magical compass David had built under Prometheus' teachings and tapped nervously over the needle that pointed at 'Camp': she opened her mouth, but no sound escaped her as she woodenly took the helm, which remained loose in her hands, unlike the other few times she had found herself briefly holding it since they first set sail from the Camp.

She swallowed hollowly, knowing that she'd need to sleep over what she had witnessed in order to truly understand it, and she managed to ask, her eyes on the small form of Annabeth in his arms: "Why? I mean..."

"We have her body, don't we? The Vellum will take care of every damage." he answered distractedly while he turned his back: "I also have the pauldron-like relic from Kampe, aren't you curious to see how it will match our newly missing figurehead?"

*That seems farfetched.* Hailey's hands clenched on the helm at the memory of Kymopoleia casually giving proof of her might: "If it works, it'd be..."

"Suspiciously convenient, uh?" a crooked smile lifted an angle of Icarus' lips, even if his eyes didn't move from the form of Annabeth: pale and wet, with her blond hair almost glued to her skull, she seemed smaller than ever. "Dionysus commented once on how I

was able to recognize the Moirai when they slapped me on the face: in this instance, I'm unwilling to ignore the advantage it could bring."

"Icarus," Hailey couldn't understand how a demigod as experienced as him, as practical to the point of callousness that he had proven to be, could miss the obvious: "even the Fleece cannot heal her..." the absence of the drachmas she and Bianca had convinced everyone to wear was a glaring hint. And given the two golden coins that occasionally clinked on the man's left ear, the daughter of Hypno knew that he couldn't not know.

"Do you remember the date?" the question came out of nowhere, but nevertheless, feeling the seriousness of the captain, she answered.

"December 17th."

"As long as this storm persists and we're on the sea, we are hidden from Olympus thanks to Poseidon's little murder attempt." the organic eye he had left seemed to shine with an inner fire as he straightened his shoulders, the golden bundle in his arms not stirring in any way, "On the solstice, the council will reunite... can't you guess the obvious?"

At Hailey's shaking head, Icarus let out a low chuckle: "The King of the Underworld will be busy, and since Annabeth's body will remain in optimal condition thanks to the Vellum, we only need to take her soul back."

Paradoxically, the enormity of what she had just been told stunned Hailey into apathy, and she ended up asking with a dull tone: "But why did you ask *her* to bring us at Camp?"

"There's a bigger game afoot..." his expression darkened minutely, "Warnings given too early that didn't make sense until now..." Icarus simply shook his head and began to walk away, only to speak over his shoulder: "Let's just say, that we'll need a thief for this, and I just know the best one."

AN

**I've begun using the other characters' Points of View to try and color a bit those that have been a bit one-dimensional up until now. We've more or less got a character going for Icarus, Annabeth, Bianca, Abigail (back on the island for now), and Hailey (more with this chapter).**

**This chapter had been planned in the very moment that I got Annabeth to sneak on board of the *Adamas*, and I finally lay out what this next arc will be about.**

**This will be a much more intense arc, I promise, it should take no longer than... let's say 6 chapters.**

**I hope you enjoyed this! I tried to keep the conversation with Kymopoleia as barebones as possible, without taking away from the solemnity of the event, and I remarked once more the 'power of names'-thing that's going on in canon: this time the effects is merely that of 'applied hindsight'.**

**Opinions? Hopes?**