# **Chapter Continuation - Arrival in New York**

## **Familiar Streets, Unwanted Memories**

The Manhattan skyline came into view as Percy guided the convertible over the Queensboro Bridge, and despite everything that had changed in his life, the sight still hit him with a complicated mix of emotions. The city stretched out before them, all steel and glass and restless energy—so different from Futo's more measured pace, yet undeniably the place where his story had begun before he'd moved to Japan at age eight.

"Take the next exit," Grover instructed, consulting the directions he'd written on a napkin. "We're meeting your father down by the docks."

Percy nodded, navigating through the familiar streets with muscle memory he hadn't realized he still possessed. Three years in Japan had changed him, but apparently hadn't erased the mental map of his first home. They passed through neighborhoods that triggered flashes of recognition—the bodega where his mother used to buy groceries, the park where she'd taken him to play when he was small.

Then they turned onto a street Percy wished he didn't remember quite so well.

His grip tightened on the steering wheel as they passed the apartment building where he'd lived with Sally and Gabe. The same brick facade, the same rusted fire escape, the same windows that had witnessed too many arguments and worse. Percy's knuckles went white as a memory surfaced unbidden—Gabe's hand raised, his mother's quiet gasp, the sound of impact, the smell of beer and cigarettes that seemed to permeate everything in that apartment.

"Percy?" Grover's voice was gentle, concerned. "You okay, man?"

Percy blinked, forcing himself back to the present. "Fine," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "Just... haven't been back here in a while."

Grover didn't push, but Percy caught the way his friend's eyes flicked to Percy's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, then to the apartment building they were leaving behind. The satyr was observant enough to put the pieces together, even if he didn't say anything about it.

They drove in silence for a few blocks before Percy spoke again, his voice more relaxed as they moved away from that particular neighborhood. "You know, after we dealt with the Furies back there, I've been thinking about what you said. About keeping the Gaia Memories low profile."

Grover shifted in his seat, looking uncomfortable. "Percy, I really think—"

"The gods are going to find out about them eventually," Percy interrupted calmly. "I mean, I'm about to have a face-to-face meeting with Poseidon. You think he won't sense something that powerful in his own son's possession?"

"For your sake, I hope they don't," Grover said quietly, his fingers picking nervously at the edge of the napkin.

Percy glanced at him. "I'm guessing you've read a bit about Greek mythology, right?"

"Yeah?" Percy replied, not sure where this was going.

Grover swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Then you know how... cautious—"

"You mean paranoid?" Percy interjected with dry humor.

"—paranoid Zeus can be about potential threats to his power." Grover's voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Like, really, really paranoid."

Percy was quiet for a moment, processing this. "So Zeus is like my uncle."

"Pretty much, though don't expect any long overdue birthday gifts," Grover said with nervous humor that didn't quite hide his genuine worry. "Actually, I think the only birthday gift he's gonna be giving you is a lightning bolt to the fa—"

"I get it, Grover," Percy sighed, cutting off the morbid joke. He understood the implications well enough without having them spelled out in graphic detail.

They were approaching the waterfront now, the smell of salt air and harbor activity growing stronger. Percy found the familiar scent oddly comforting—it reminded him of the few peaceful moments he'd had as a child, when his mother would take him down to the beach and he could forget about everything wrong with their life for a little while.

"Turn here," Grover directed, pointing toward a marina that looked mostly deserted except for a few fishing boats and what appeared to be a small restaurant. "That's it. The Pier's End."

Percy parked the convertible and cut the engine. For a moment, they both just sat there, listening to the sound of waves lapping against the dock and the distant hum of city traffic. Seagulls cried overhead, their voices mixing with the creak of boat masts and the gentle splash of water against wood.

"Percy," Grover said finally, his voice serious in a way that made Percy turn to look at him properly. "Whatever happens in there, whatever your father tells you... just remember that you've got people who care about you. Back at camp, back in Japan. You're not alone in this."

Percy looked at his friend—really looked at him—and saw the genuine concern in Grover's eyes. Despite his nervous tendencies and his habit of panicking in dangerous situations, the satyr had proven himself to be loyal and caring. It was a reminder that Percy had been fortunate in the people who'd chosen to stand by him.

"Thanks, Grover," he said simply, and his voice was softer than usual. "That... actually means a lot."

As they got out of the car and walked toward the restaurant, Percy felt the weight of the Lost Driver against his waist, hidden beneath his jacket. Whatever his divine father wanted to discuss, whatever crisis had prompted this emergency meeting, Percy knew he was walking into it carrying secrets that could change everything.

But he'd faced down criminal organizations and monsters before. He could handle one conversation with a god.

Even if that god happened to be his father.

## **Meeting the Sea God**

The restaurant was nearly empty, just a few tables occupied by what looked like locals grabbing a late lunch. The smell of fried fish and salt air filled the space, along with the distant sound of seagulls and lapping waves from the marina outside. A ceiling fan turned lazily overhead, and the wooden floors creaked softly under their feet.

Percy's eyes swept the room automatically, cataloging exits and potential threats out of habit, before settling on a man seated alone at a corner table in the back. The figure kept his head down, hands wrapped around a coffee cup, but something about his presence made the air itself feel different—heavier, more charged, like the atmosphere before a storm.

Grover caught Percy's eye and nodded toward the man, confirming what Percy had already suspected. The satyr made his way to a table near the entrance, positioning himself where he could watch the door while still keeping an eye on the meeting.

Percy walked quietly across the restaurant, hands in his pockets, his footsteps barely audible on the worn wooden floor. He stopped beside the table, waiting.

The man slowly raised his head, and Percy found himself looking into eyes that were the exact same sea-green as his own. The face was unfamiliar—middle-aged, weathered like someone who spent time on the ocean, with dark hair streaked with premature gray and lines around his eyes that spoke of both laughter and deep concern. But the connection Percy felt was immediate and undeniable, like recognizing his own reflection in deep water.

Without a word, Percy pulled out the chair across from the man and sat down.

They remained in silence for a long time, two strangers who shared the same eyes, the same blood, the same connection to forces older than civilization. The restaurant continued its quiet bustle around them—the clink of dishes, muted conversation, the soft hiss of the coffee machine—but their corner felt removed from it all, existing in its own pocket of stillness.

Finally, Poseidon spoke, his voice carrying the subtle rhythm of waves. "How are you doing?"

The question hung in the air between them, simple yet loaded with years of absence. Percy studied his father's face, noting the genuine concern there, the way his fingers tightened slightly around his coffee cup as he waited for an answer.

"Fine," Percy replied simply.

Another pause. The waitress passed their table, refilling water glasses at nearby seats, her presence briefly intruding on their isolated conversation before moving on.

"And your mother?"

"Fine."

The silence stretched between them again, neither comfortable nor uncomfortable—just present, like the tide. Percy found himself studying his father's hands wrapped around the coffee cup, noting the calluses that suggested physical work, the way his fingers seemed to move with the fluid grace of water itself.

"She's working as a florist," Percy added after a moment, something in his father's expression prompting him to elaborate.

"A florist?" Poseidon echoed, and there was genuine interest in his voice, as if this small detail about Sally's life mattered to him. His expression softened slightly, and Percy caught a glimpse of something deeper—perhaps memories of Sally's love for growing things, for nurturing life.

"She can only be doing well then," he remarked softly, and Percy heard the warmth in his tone, the implication of understanding and approval.

Another moment passed before Poseidon asked, "And Japan? Are you... doing well at school?"

He actually winced as the question left his mouth, as if he realized how inadequate it sounded—a father asking about homework when there were clearly much larger issues at stake. His fingers drummed once against the table, betraying his nervousness despite his divine composure.

Percy still replied evenly, "Also fine."

Poseidon sighed deeply, gathering himself like someone preparing to dive into cold water. "I am aware of your... exploits."

Across the restaurant, Grover visibly slumped in his chair, bringing a hand to cover his face as if he could hide from whatever was about to unfold. Percy caught the gesture in his peripheral vision but kept his attention fixed on his father.

Percy met his father's gaze directly. "And?"

Poseidon didn't answer immediately, his sea-green eyes studying his son with an intensity that felt like being examined by the ocean itself—vast, ancient, and ultimately unknowable. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet but carried unmistakable authority.

"Show me."

Percy didn't tear his gaze away from his father's, though now his eyes seemed to be searching for something—some hint of judgment, understanding, or threat. The restaurant sounds faded into background noise as the moment stretched between them, father and son locked in silent communication.

After a long moment, Percy reached beneath his jacket and withdrew the Lost Driver, placing it on the table between them with deliberate care. The device seemed almost innocuous sitting there next to the salt and pepper shakers, but Percy could see his father's reaction to its presence—the slight widening of his eyes, the tension that suddenly appeared in his shoulders.

Then, with even more deliberate precision, Percy plucked the purple Joker Memory from the device and set it beside the belt.

Poseidon's eyes shifted to the seemingly innocent flash drive, and his hand on the table slowly curled into a fist. The power contained within that small device was unmistakable to his divine senses—ancient, fundamental, and impossibly vast. He couldn't quite believe that such a force could be contained in something so unassuming.

"I..." Poseidon began, then stopped, gathering his thoughts like someone trying to find words for the incomprehensible. "I went to Japan."

Percy remained silent, his steady gaze encouraging his father to continue.

"When I heard of Gabe's arrest," Poseidon said carefully, and Percy noticed the way his father's voice tightened slightly at the name, "I planned to meet with Sally. But by the time I could arrange it, you had both already left for Japan." He added with a touch of rueful humor, though it didn't quite hide the regret in his voice, "Busy schedule."

Percy's expression didn't change, waiting.

"So I followed," Poseidon admitted, his fingers drumming nervously against his coffee cup. "I kept tabs on you both since your old protection was no longer there."

Percy's eyes narrowed, and when he spoke, his voice carried quiet venom that made the temperature around their table seem to drop several degrees. "Old protection?"

Poseidon seemed to realize he'd stepped into dangerous territory, his divine composure faltering as he saw the look that was beginning to form on his son's face. "There was a reason Gabe—"

He was cut off by the expression that came over Percy's features. All light seemed to abandon Percy's eyes, leaving something that wasn't quite a glare but was somehow far worse—a complete absence of warmth that spoke of deep, carefully controlled rage. The air around them grew heavy, and Poseidon could swear he felt the ocean itself responding to his son's emotional state.

Poseidon wisely abandoned any explanation involving Gabe and instead gestured toward the Joker Memory on the table, his voice more cautious now. "These," he said, clearly choosing his words carefully. "Tell me about these."

Percy picked up the purple device, turning it over in his hands with the familiarity of someone who had used it countless times. The movement was almost reverent, like handling a trusted weapon or a precious artifact.

"Gaia Memories," he began, his voice returning to its professional cadence. "They contain the Earth's experiences—its knowledge of natural forces, elements, concepts. When used with the proper technology, they allow the user to access and channel those forces." He set it back down carefully, the plastic clicking softly against the wooden table. "This particular one is called Joker. It represents the wild card, the unpredictable element that can change the outcome of any situation."

Poseidon nodded slowly, his divine senses confirming what Percy was explaining. The power emanating from the small device was indeed connected to Gaia herself—primal, ancient, and vast in ways that made even his own considerable abilities seem limited by comparison.

"If you've been keeping tabs on me," Percy continued, his tone remaining neutral but carrying an unmistakable undercurrent, "then you should know about Museum. The criminal organization that was using these to create monsters called Dopants."

"Only the surface level," Poseidon admitted, and there was something almost sheepish in his expression—a god admitting to incomplete knowledge.

Percy's eyes didn't leave his father's face, studying him with the analytical intensity he'd learned from years of detective work. "Had to keep your distance," he added, the words delivered neutrally but carrying an unmistakable undercurrent of resentment.

Poseidon felt the accusation in those words like a physical blow. His son was right, of course—divine politics and the restrictions placed on the gods' involvement in mortal affairs had prevented him from being more directly involved in Percy's life, even when that life was in danger. The knowledge sat heavily on his shoulders, another weight to add to millennia of similar regrets.

"But I did witness you… transform for the first time," Poseidon said after a moment, and there might have been a hint of pride in his voice that cut through the tension between them.

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes distant as he recalled the memory, and Percy could see something shift in his father's expression—wonder mixed with paternal concern. "I could hardly believe what I was seeing. Technology that could grant such power to a mortal—any mortal. And there you were, fighting a man who had become a beast because of these devices." His gaze returned to the Joker Memory on the table, and Percy caught the mixture of awe and worry in his father's eyes. "Devices that hold the kind of power that should not belong to mortals."

Percy studied his father's expression, noting the careful way Poseidon was choosing his words. "Then you must know about Philip."

Poseidon was silent for several heartbeats, his coffee growing cold as he weighed his response. When he finally nodded, it was with the slow deliberation of someone confirming something they'd hoped wasn't true. "Again, only surface level."

Percy's jaw worked silently as he deliberated, weighing the risks and benefits of revealing more. His partner's safety had to come first, but if Poseidon already knew something about Philip's existence, partial information might be more dangerous than the full truth. The detective in him recognized the precarious position they were in—caught between honesty and protection.

Seeing his son's internal struggle, Poseidon spoke quietly, his voice carrying the weight of divine authority and paternal concern combined. "Whatever you tell me, Percy, I will not do anything to hurt you or those who stood by you during those years of battle." His voice deepened, taking on the resonance of ocean depths. "You have my word."

The promise hung in the air between them, and Percy could feel the power behind it—this wasn't just a father's reassurance, but a divine oath that bound Poseidon to his word. The silence stretched between them, tense and heavy with unspoken implications. Percy's fingers drummed once against the table as he weighed his options, calculating risks the way Sokichi had taught him.

Finally, he spoke, his voice dropping to ensure their conversation remained private. "Philip isn't entirely human. He's connected to something called the Gaia Library—an archive of all the knowledge and memories in the world." Percy watched his father's face carefully as he continued, noting every micro-expression. "That's how Museum was able to manufacture the Gaia Memories in the first place. They had Philip, and they were using his access to refine their technology."

Poseidon's eyes widened, genuine surprise crossing his weathered features. The implications of what Percy was describing hit him immediately—a mortal with direct access to Gaia's complete repository of knowledge was unprecedented, potentially world-changing in its ramifications.

"Philip was the key to their entire operation," Percy continued, his voice taking on the measured tone he used when presenting evidence. "Until Sokichi and I broke into their base and rescued him. After that, deprived of Philip's abilities, Museum could only produce what you might call knockoff Memories. Dangerous, highly addictive versions that would eventually kill the user from overuse."

Poseidon absorbed this information like the ocean absorbing a stone—taking it deep, letting the ripples spread through his understanding. A criminal organization with access to Gaia's power, a mortal boy who could tap into primordial knowledge, his own son wielding forces that predated the Olympians themselves. The scope of it was staggering.

"The scope of what you've been involved in," Poseidon said slowly, his voice filled with something that might have been awe, "is far greater than I realized." His divine mind was already working through the ramifications, understanding why Zeus would be concerned, why the theft of his Master Bolt had the gods on edge. If someone had access to Gaia-level power and knowledge, stealing from the Olympians wouldn't just be possible—it might be inevitable.

"And yet you don't believe I'm responsible for whatever brought you here," Percy continued, reading his father's expression with the skill of someone trained to analyze suspects and witnesses.

Poseidon shook his head slowly, his expression clearing as certainty settled over his features. "No. I don't."

After a moment of consideration, Poseidon revealed why he had really called this meeting. He spoke of Zeus's growing paranoia, of the missing Master Bolt, of accusations and threats that were building toward war among the Big Three. Percy held back from mentioning that he'd already suspected as much from the Fury attack, letting his father explain the situation in full.

When Poseidon finished, Percy leaned back in his chair, his analytical mind already working through the implications. "So you want me to either investigate... or confess."

Poseidon winced visibly at the blunt summary, his hand tightening around his coffee cup. "I'm not trying to accuse you of anything, Percy. I know you're not responsible for this."

Percy shrugged with practiced ease, though there was something harder in his expression now. "Wouldn't be the first time I've been under suspicion for something I didn't do."

The casual way Percy delivered those words made Poseidon's chest tighten with implications he could only imagine.

"Actually," Percy said, his tone becoming more businesslike as he shifted back into detective mode, "the Furies already paid me a visit about this." He watched as his father's face went pale, color draining from his weathered features. "They accused me of stealing both the Master Bolt AND the Helm of Darkness."

The color drained completely from Poseidon's face, and his coffee cup rattled slightly against the table as his hand trembled. "Hades's helm is missing as well?"

Percy raised an eyebrow, noting his father's shocked reaction with the attention to detail that had made him a successful detective. "You didn't know about that part."

A tense silence washed over father and son, the weight of this revelation settling between them like a storm front. The restaurant around them seemed to fade away—the quiet conversations at other tables, the clatter of dishes from the kitchen, the distant sound of boats in the marina. Everything narrowed to this moment, this conversation that was reshaping both their understanding of the crisis threatening the pantheon.

Poseidon cleared his throat, his divine composure clearly shaken by this new information. "Percy," he said carefully, leaning forward with the intensity of someone making a crucial request, "can you do it? Help find both the Master Bolt and the Helm of Darkness?"

Percy didn't answer immediately, his detective's mind weighing implications and risks with the methodical approach Sokichi had drilled into him. He studied his father's face, searching for any sign of duplicity or hidden agenda, then found himself thinking about what Philip would say about taking on a case of this magnitude.

Much to Poseidon's surprise, a slow grin began to form on his son's face—not the polite smile he'd worn throughout their conversation, but something sharper, more predatory. It was the expression of someone who had just been presented with a puzzle worth solving.

"Are you asking to hire the Narumi Detective Agency for the case?" Percy asked, and there was something almost playful in his voice now.

Poseidon blinked in bewilderment, clearly not having expected this response. Then he shook his head with what might have been amusement, unable to suppress a slight tug at the corner of his lips. "Yes," he said finally, and his voice carried both relief and paternal fondness. "That is exactly what I'm asking for. But only partly." His expression grew more serious, more personal. "I also simply wanted to see my son up close. To see the man he's becoming."

Percy stared at his father, his grin softening as he took in those words. For a moment, the professional mask slipped, and Poseidon caught a glimpse of the boy beneath the detective—someone who had grown up without a father, who had learned to be self-reliant perhaps too early, but who still carried that fundamental need for parental recognition and approval.

"I'll take the case," Percy said finally, his voice quieter than before but carrying unmistakable determination. "But I'm going to need a few things for the investigation."

Poseidon nodded, leaning forward with interest and something that looked like hope. "Name them."

Percy's expression shifted back to business, but there was something more open in his demeanor now, as if his father's words had built a bridge between them that hadn't existed before. "First, I need my partner. Philip needs to come to Camp Half-Blood. This kind of case—missing artifacts with this level of divine power—I'll need his access to the Gaia Library to research properly."

Poseidon's face grew thoughtful, and the silence stretched longer than Percy had hoped. The sea god's eyes seemed to be weighing something, calculating divine politics and potential complications that Percy could only guess at. Percy felt his jaw tighten as he prepared for refusal.

"What else?" Poseidon asked instead, surprising Percy with the deflection rather than direct answer.

Percy blinked, caught off guard by the non-answer. "There are some equipment pieces back in Futo that I'll need. Additional Gaia Memories, research materials Sokichi left behind, some technical gear that Philip and I developed for our investigations."

Again, Poseidon considered this for a long moment, his sea-green eyes distant as if consulting with forces Percy couldn't see or understand. The pause stretched uncomfortably, and Percy was beginning to expect refusal when Poseidon gave him a firm nod.

"Agreed. I'll arrange for everything to be transported safely."

But Percy wasn't finished. He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a tone that brooked no negotiation, carrying all the protective steel he'd developed over years of looking out for those who couldn't protect themselves. "I need your word that Philip will be completely unharmed while he's at camp. And that his true nature—his connection to the Gaia Library—stays between us. As far as anyone else knows, he's just my research partner."

Poseidon met his son's steady gaze, recognizing the protective steel behind Percy's request. The boy had lost his mentor, had fought to save Philip from one dangerous situation already, and wasn't about to let divine politics put his partner at risk again. There was something fierce in Percy's expression that reminded Poseidon of the ocean in storm—beautiful and terrible in its protective fury.

"You have my word," Poseidon said solemnly, the promise carrying the weight of a divine oath that would bind him to his commitment. "Philip will be under my personal protection while at camp, and his secret will remain exactly that."

Internally, Poseidon felt something twist in his chest—a mixture of pride and regret that was almost overwhelming. Pride at seeing his son's loyalty and protective instincts, his willingness to stand firm on principles that mattered. Regret at all the years he hadn't been there to witness Percy developing these qualities, to guide and support him through the challenges that had shaped him into this remarkable young man.

"Thank you," Percy said, and there was genuine gratitude in his voice now, not just professional courtesy. The tension that had been building between them throughout the conversation seemed to ease, replaced by something that felt like the beginning of understanding.

## **Philip's Arrival**

Two days later, Percy stood at the top of Half-Blood Hill, watching as a sleek black sedan wound its way up the access road. He'd been waiting for nearly an hour, having arrived early out of anticipation rather than necessity. The morning sun cast long shadows across the valley below, and the familiar sounds of camp activities drifted up from the training areas—the clash of weapons, shouts of instruction, the distant laughter of campers enjoying their morning routines.

The sedan pulled to a stop near the pine tree that marked the camp's boundary, and Percy felt himself smile as the passenger door opened. Philip emerged with characteristic precision, adjusting his jacket and scanning the surroundings with analytical eyes before his gaze settled on Percy. Even from a distance, Percy could see his partner taking mental notes, cataloging everything from the defensive positioning to the magical aura that surrounded the place.

They approached each other with the easy familiarity of partners who had worked together for years. No dramatic greetings or emotional displays—just Philip extending his fist, and Percy meeting it with his own in their customary greeting that spoke of shared battles and mutual trust.

"How was the trip?" Percy asked as they walked toward the camp entrance, noting the way Philip's eyes continued to move, analyzing everything they passed.

"Enlightening," Philip replied in his usual measured tone. "I'm somewhat new to private jet travel, though I must admit I expected more mystical means of transportation given the nature of this place."

Percy chuckled, remembering his own surprise at some of the mundane aspects of the mythological world. "I figured it was mostly for camouflage. Keep everything as mundane as possible in case the Mist can't conceal it completely."

Philip's head tilted slightly, a gesture Percy recognized as his thinking pose. "Ah, this Mist you mentioned during our phone conversation. The perception filter that makes mortals see what they expect rather than what's actually present."

"Exactly that one," Percy confirmed, gesturing toward the valley spread out below them. "Come on, let me show you around. Fair warning though—this place is nothing like Futo."

They walked through the camp at Percy's usual measured pace, Philip taking in every detail with silent analytical intensity. Percy pointed out the various facilities, explaining the training schedules and social dynamics he'd observed, while Philip absorbed the information with the focused attention of someone building a comprehensive mental map.

"The cabins are organized by divine parentage," Percy explained as they passed Cabin Row. "Each god gets their own cabin for their children. It's... interesting from a social dynamics perspective."

"Segregation based on genetic heritage," Philip observed neutrally. "Potentially problematic for camp unity."

"You'd think so, but it mostly works. There's competition, sure, but also a kind of respect between the different cabins. Everyone knows they're dealing with powers they don't fully understand."

They were passing near the arts and crafts cabin when Drew appeared, jogging toward them with her characteristic bright smile and the effortless grace that seemed to come naturally to Aphrodite's children.

"Percy!" she called out, slowing to a walk as she approached, her breathing only slightly elevated from her run. "I was wondering when I'd run into you again."

"Drew," Percy replied with a polite nod, then gestured to his companion. "This is Philip, my partner from Japan. Philip, this is Drew Tanaka, daughter of Aphrodite."

Philip studied Drew for perhaps three seconds—long enough for Percy to recognize the look that meant his partner was accessing information from sources most people couldn't even imagine existed. Percy felt a familiar sense of dread beginning to build.

"Drew Tanaka, age sixteen, daughter of businessman Kenji Tanaka and the goddess Aphrodite," Philip began in his typical matter-of-fact tone, apparently unaware of the social minefield he was about to walk into. "Former resident of Montreal, Canada, relocated to Los Angeles at age twelve following her parents' divorce. Attended Beverly Hills Preparatory Academy before her demigod abilities manifested last year. Currently pursuing modeling contracts with Elite Model Management while balancing her camp responsibilities. Has two half-siblings from her father's second marriage, maintains limited contact with extended family, and demonstrated natural aptitude for charmspeak abilities typical of Aphrodite children."

The silence that followed was deafening.

Percy closed his eyes and brought his hand to his face, mortification written across his features as he felt heat creeping up his neck. Drew stared at Philip with a mixture of shock and bewilderment, her mouth slightly open as she processed what had just happened.

"Philip," Percy said through gritted teeth, his voice carefully controlled in the way it got when he was trying very hard not to explode, "has a habit of researching people. It's... training from our detective work. He must have felt inclined to look you up after I mentioned you."

Philip blinked, seemingly unaware of the social misstep he'd just committed, his expression as neutral and analytical as ever. "Was that inappropriate? I was simply providing context for our introduction."

Percy turned to Drew, bowing deeply in the precise, formal manner he'd learned in Japan, the gesture carrying genuine contrition. "I am so, so sorry. That was completely out of line, and I apologize for—"

"Percy, it's okay," Drew interrupted, though her voice carried a note of amazement rather than anger. She looked between the two boys, clearly trying to process what had just happened, her expression cycling through surprise, bewilderment, and something that might have been impressed curiosity. "I mean, it's... comprehensive, I'll give him that." She paused, studying Philip's expression with the analytical eye of someone used to reading people. "He's not really big on social cues, is he?"

"Not particularly," Percy admitted, straightening from his bow but still looking embarrassed. "Philip processes information differently than most people. He doesn't always recognize when sharing data might be... unwelcome."

Philip tilted his head again, genuinely curious and apparently fascinated by this social dynamic he didn't fully understand. "Should I not have provided that information? I was attempting to demonstrate familiarity with relevant background details."

Drew looked at him for a long moment, her expression shifting from bewilderment to something closer to amusement. Then, surprisingly, she laughed—not mockingly, but with genuine humor that seemed to break the tension. "You know what? At least you're thorough. Most guys just try to impress me with their abs or their trust fund."

## **Base of Operations**

Later that evening, Percy led Philip to the Poseidon cabin, opening the door to reveal a space that had been completely transformed. What had once been an empty divine dwelling now resembled their detective agency back in Futo down to the smallest detail—two desks positioned at precise angles that allowed for optimal sight lines and communication, filing cabinets against the walls, a coffee station in the corner with Philip's preferred brand, even the same worn couch where Percy used to sleep during long cases.

Philip stepped inside and paused, his analytical gaze sweeping across the familiar setup with something that might have been surprise flickering across his usually composed features. "You recreated the Narumi Detective Agency," he observed, and there was something almost like warmth in his usually neutral tone. "The positioning is nearly identical. Even the sight lines from the desks to the entrance match our original office."

Percy scratched the back of his head, a flush creeping up his neck as he watched his partner examine the space. "I thought it might help us work better if everything felt... familiar. You know, like we were back home."

"It does," Philip said simply, settling into what had always been his chair back in Japan with the fluid grace of someone claiming familiar territory. "This will serve as an adequate base of operations—an agency away from our agency."

Percy took his own familiar position behind the other desk, pulling out a notepad and pen with the ritualistic precision of someone beginning a new case. "Alright, let's go over what we know. And probably more importantly, what we don't know."

Philip opened his laptop—a sleek machine that hummed quietly to life—and pulled up a new case file. "Timeline first. When was the Master Bolt stolen?"

"About six months before I arrived at camp," Percy replied, consulting his notes from the meeting with Poseidon. "So roughly nine months ago, give or take."

"And the Helm of Darkness?"

"Unknown, but presumably around the same timeframe given that the Furies mentioned both thefts." Percy tapped his pen against his notepad thoughtfully. "The fact that they brought them up together suggests the crimes are connected."

Philip's fingers moved efficiently across his keyboard, the soft clicking filling the quiet space between them. "Keywords for the Gaia Library search: Master Bolt, Helm of Darkness, Zeus, Hades, Winter Solstice."

Percy watched as Philip's eyes took on that distant look that meant he was accessing the vast repository of the Earth's memories. The process took several minutes, during which Philip remained perfectly still except for the occasional slight tilt of his head, as if he were listening to voices only he could hear.

When he finally refocused, Philip made a note on his pad with careful precision. "The Helm of Darkness is alternatively known as the Cap of Invisibility. This designation may become significant to our investigation."

Percy leaned forward, his detective instincts engaging as the implications became clear. "If the thief used the Helm first, they could have gone about completely undetected when they stole the Master Bolt. That would explain how they bypassed Zeus's security measures."

"Logical deduction," Philip agreed, his fingers continuing to move across the keyboard as he cross-referenced information. "Zeus would undoubtedly have ironclad protections around his primary weapon. Conventional stealth would be insufficient."

Percy stood and began pacing—a habit that helped him think through complex problems. "So we're looking at someone who had access to both Olympus and the Underworld, or at least knew how to get there. That narrows our suspect pool considerably."

"Indeed. The logistics alone would require either divine assistance or extensive knowledge of mythological geography." Philip paused his typing. "Percy, there's something else. The timing of these thefts—they occurred during a period of relative stability among the pantheon. Whoever orchestrated this chose their moment carefully."

## **Divine Interruption**

High atop Mount Olympus, Zeus sat in his private office reading the morning reports when he suddenly sneezed—a thunderous sound that rattled the windows and caused papers to flutter across his desk like startled birds.

"Bless you," Hera said absently from her position near the window, then turned to survey the cluttered space with obvious disapproval. "You really need to clean up all this mess you have lying around. It's completely chaotic in here."

Zeus grunted noncommittally, already returning his attention to the documents before him, apparently unconcerned with either his wife's complaint or the mysterious sneeze. Lightning flickered briefly around his fingers as he read, betraying his agitation despite his outward calm.

## **The Bigger Picture**

Back in the Poseidon cabin, Percy was studying their timeline when realization hit him like a physical blow. "The trail must have gone cold already. We're working with evidence that's nearly a year old."

"Correct," Philip confirmed, his voice carrying the measured tone he used when delivering unwelcome but necessary information. "And according to your father, we have until the next Winter Solstice to resolve this case."

"Or there will be war between the Big Three," Percy finished grimly, the weight of that deadline settling on his shoulders like a physical burden.

Philip was quiet for a moment, processing this information through his connection to Gaia's memories, his eyes taking on that distant look that meant he was accessing something significant. "Percy," he said finally, his voice carrying the careful tone he used when developing a new theory, "I believe we may be looking at this incorrectly."

Percy stopped pacing and turned to face his partner fully. "How so?"

"What if the theft of these artifacts isn't the primary goal, but rather a means to an end?" Philip's fingers steepled in front of him as he spoke, a gesture Percy recognized as his partner's way of organizing complex thoughts. "The timing, the choice of items, the inevitable deadline—it all points to a larger plan with a specific objective."

Percy's eyes sharpened as the logic clicked into place. "You think someone's trying to destabilize the pantheon on purpose."

"To sow chaos within the Olympian power structure," Philip confirmed with a slight nod. "The question becomes: who benefits from a war between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades?"

Percy resumed his pacing, this time with more urgency. "Someone who wants to see the Big Three tear each other apart while they position themselves to take advantage of the chaos."

"Precisely. And such a person would need to be powerful enough to steal from gods, connected enough to access both Olympus and the Underworld, and patient enough to wait nearly a year for their plan to reach fruition."

## **Morning Encounters**

The next morning, Percy continued showing Philip around the camp, pointing out areas they hadn't covered during the previous day's tour. The morning air was crisp and clear, carrying the sounds of camp activities—the rhythmic thunk of arrows hitting targets, the clash of practice swords, and the occasional burst of laughter from various training groups.

They were passing the volleyball courts when Drew jogged up to them, having apparently finished her morning run. Her workout clothes were perfectly coordinated, and despite having just finished exercising, she managed to look effortlessly put-together.

"Good morning, you two," she said, slightly out of breath but still managing to sound perfectly composed. Her gaze lingered on Philip, taking in his appearance with the appraising eye of someone well-versed in fashion and presentation.

"Morning, Drew," Percy replied, noting the way she was studying his partner. "How's training going?"

"Same as always," she said, but her attention remained focused on Philip with obvious interest. "You know, I have to say—you have really good fashion sense. That jacket fits you perfectly, and the color coordination is spot-on. Most guys here dress like they grabbed whatever was clean off their floor."

Philip glanced down at his outfit—a precisely tailored jacket over a simple shirt, everything chosen for both functionality and appearance with the meticulous attention to detail he applied to everything in his life. "Thank you. I find that proper presentation often facilitates more productive interactions."

Drew's eyes ran over him again, more analytically this time, noting his delicate features, naturally graceful posture, and the way he carried himself with quiet confidence. "You know, I actually heard from some of the male campers yesterday that there was a 'new girl' at camp. Now I can see why they were confused."

Philip tilted his head slightly, processing this information without any apparent offense or surprise. "I see. Such misidentification is not uncommon. Physical appearance can be misleading in terms of gender assumptions."

"You're really not bothered by that?" Drew asked, seeming genuinely curious about his reaction rather than trying to provoke one.

"Not particularly," Philip replied with characteristic calm, his expression remaining neutral and analytical. "People's opinions about my appearance are largely irrelevant to my actual capabilities or identity."

Drew studied him for another moment, then smiled with what looked like genuine appreciation. "With your bone structure and that whole ethereal thing you've got going on, you'd be a shoo-in as a model. I already tried convincing Mr. Softboiled here," she gestured toward Percy with obvious amusement, "but he wasn't interested."

"Hardboiled," Percy corrected automatically, though there was no real irritation in his voice—more like resigned acceptance of an ongoing joke.

Before Philip could respond to Drew's modeling suggestion, a small voice called out from nearby, high-pitched with urgency.

"Drew! Drew!"

They turned to see a young girl with blonde hair done in neat pigtails running toward them with the unsteady gait of someone still growing into their legs. She couldn't have been more than ten years old, and her face was flushed with exertion and what looked like mild panic.

"What is it, Lacy?" Drew asked, her tone immediately shifting to something more gentle and sisterly, the kind of voice someone used with a beloved younger sibling.

"Have you seen my hairbrush? I can't find it anywhere," Lacy said, slightly out of breath and clearly distressed by this domestic crisis.

"You probably left it by your bed again," Drew replied patiently, her expression softening with obvious affection. "Check under your pillow—that's usually where it ends up when you're brushing your hair before sleep."

"Oh! Thanks!" Lacy beamed, her face lighting up with relief at this simple solution. Then her gaze shifted to Percy and Philip, and she recognized Percy immediately, her expression brightening further. "Hi, Percy!"

"Hey there, Lacy," Percy replied with a genuine smile that transformed his usually serious expression. The girl had approached him several times since his arrival, usually when she needed help with tasks that were too difficult for her—most of which, Percy had noticed, seemed to be assigned by Mr. D with deliberate inconvenience in mind.

Lacy's eyes then settled on Philip, and she tilted her head with the unguarded curiosity of childhood, studying him with the direct stare that only children could get away with. "You're really pretty," she said matter-of-factly, the observation delivered without any hint of embarrassment or social filtering.

"Lacy," Drew said with gentle reproach, though there was amusement in her voice, "Philip is a boy."

The little girl's eyes went wide, and she immediately looked mortified, her hands flying to cover her mouth. "Oh no! I'm sorry! I didn't mean—I wasn't trying to be mean or anything!"

"It's perfectly fine," Philip interrupted calmly, and there was something that might have been amusement in his usually neutral expression, a slight softening around his eyes. "Actually, I'm rather flattered by the observation."

Lacy looked between Philip and Drew uncertainly, clearly still embarrassed by her mistake but reassured by Philip's lack of offense.

"Really?" she asked in a small voice, peering at him from between her fingers.

"Really," Philip confirmed with a slight nod, his tone carrying gentle reassurance. "Aesthetic appreciation is simply that—appreciation. The intent behind your comment was clearly positive."

## **By the Lake**

After Lacy had run off to find her hairbrush, skipping with renewed energy and chattering to herself about checking under pillows, Percy and Philip made their way toward the canoe lake where they'd arranged to meet Grover. The path wound through a grove of strawberry plants, and Percy could smell the sweet scent mixing with the earthy aroma of the lake water ahead.

The satyr was waiting near the water's edge, nervously fidgeting with a tin can he was apparently planning to eat for lunch. His hooves shifted restlessly in the grass, and Percy could see the telltale signs of Grover working up his courage to say something important.

"Grover," Percy called out as they approached, his voice carrying across the quiet space between them. "I'd like you to properly meet my partner, Philip."

Grover stood and extended his hand, though Percy noticed the nervous tremor in his movements and the way his eyes kept darting to Philip with barely concealed curiosity. "Philip. Nice to... formally meet you."

Philip shook the offered hand with his usual composed demeanor, his grip firm but brief. "Likewise, Grover."

The silence that followed was distinctly uncomfortable. Grover kept glancing between Philip and Percy, clearly struggling with something he wanted to say but wasn't sure how to phrase without causing offense or revealing too much.

"Yeah, uh, I remember when we first met back in Japan, you made a comment about Gaia," Grover began hesitantly, his fingers working at the tin can's label. "I... I just thought, well..." He trailed off, fidgeting with the can in his hands as if it might provide him with the right words.

Philip tilted his head slightly, his expression patient but expectant, waiting for Grover to finish his thought.

The satyr raised his hands defensively, the can still clutched in one of them. "Not that there's anything wrong with you being Gaia's... Actually, does that technically make you Gaia's son or something? Because if it does, that would make you technically older than the Olympians, and I'm not sure how the power dynamics of that would work, and—"

Philip exchanged a glance with Percy, a moment of silent communication passing between the partners—the kind of wordless conversation that developed between people who had worked together long enough to read each other's thoughts. Then he looked back at Grover with his characteristic neutral expression.

"Think what you want," Philip said simply, his tone carrying just enough ambiguity to avoid outright confirmation while not quite denying anything either.

Grover pressed his lips into a thin, anxious line, clearly unsatisfied with that non-answer but apparently deciding not to push the issue further. His hooves shifted nervously in the grass.

"How's the investigation coming along?" he asked instead, his voice carrying forced casualness that didn't quite hide his genuine concern. "Any leads?"

Percy sighed, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that had become habitual when dealing with particularly frustrating cases. "What we've found so far is next to nothing. The thefts happened almost a year ago—any physical evidence or witness accounts have long since gone cold. We're essentially starting from scratch with a case that's been dormant for months."

Grover became pensive, pursing his lips in thought as he processed this information. After a long moment, his expression grew more serious and determined, the nervous energy channeling into something more purposeful.

"I want to help with the case," he said, and there was a firmness in his voice that Percy rarely heard from his satyr friend.

Both Percy and Philip looked at him with renewed attention, noting the shift in his demeanor from anxious to resolved.

"As a satyr, I'm more of an inconspicuous sort of mythical being," Grover explained, his nervous energy channeling into purposeful determination. "I can go places and ask questions without drawing the kind of attention that a son of Poseidon or someone with Gaia connections might attract. Plus, I have contacts throughout the mythological community—other satyrs, minor gods, nature spirits. I could ask around, see if anyone noticed anything unusual around the time of the thefts."

"Anything else?" Percy asked, clearly intrigued by the offer and the strategic value it represented.

"Satyrs have naturally keen senses," Grover continued with growing confidence, standing a little straighter as he spoke. "Enhanced hearing, smell, ability to detect supernatural presences. If you ever need to sniff around for clues—literally or figuratively—I'm your man. Well, goat. You know what I mean."

Percy and Philip exchanged another look, and Percy could see his partner making the same mental connection he was—back in Futo, they'd had their network of contacts and informants, people they'd dubbed the "Futo Irregulars" who could gather information from places the official detectives couldn't access.

Percy turned back to Grover and nodded decisively. "You're in."

He extended his hand, and Grover clasped it firmly, both of them shaking on the partnership with the gravity of a formal contract. Percy could see the relief and determination in his friend's eyes—Grover wanted to be useful, wanted to contribute something meaningful to solving this crisis that threatened the stability of the entire pantheon.

"Welcome to the team," Percy said, and meant it.

## **Meeting with the Camp Directors**

The afternoon sun filtered through the windows of the Big House as Percy knocked on the door to the camp directors' office. The building itself seemed to breathe with age and accumulated magic, its walls holding decades of conversations between gods and heroes, decisions that had shaped the fate of countless demigod children.

After a moment, Chiron's familiar voice called out for them to enter, warm and welcoming as always.

The office maintained its characteristic organized chaos—stacks of camp paperwork held down by magical artifacts serving as paperweights, ancient weapons mounted on walls between modern filing cabinets, and the faint scent of strawberry fields drifting through the open windows. Chiron sat behind his desk in his wheelchair form, while Dionysus lounged in a leather armchair with a Diet Coke can balanced on his knee, looking supremely bored with whatever document he'd been pretending to read.

"Percy," Chiron said warmly, his eyes brightening as they entered, the kind of genuine pleasure that came from seeing a student he was particularly fond of. "And you must be Philip. Welcome to Camp Half-Blood."

"Thank you," Philip replied with a slight nod, his analytical gaze already cataloging the contents of the room with the systematic thoroughness he applied to every new environment.

Dionysus barely glanced up from his can, though Percy caught the way his eyes lingered on Philip for a moment longer than necessary, as if trying to place something that seemed familiar but elusive. "Another stray, Peter?" he drawled with characteristic disinterest. "How delightfully predictable."

"It's Percy," came the automatic correction, though Percy's tone remained respectful despite the ongoing name butchering.

"Dionysus," Chiron said with mild reproach, the kind of gentle correction that suggested this was an ongoing battle between the two camp directors.

The wine god turned back to their guests with a gesture that managed to be both welcoming and dismissive. "Please, have a seat. I understand you've come all the way from Japan, Philip. How are you finding the camp?"

Philip settled into his chair with characteristic precision, his posture perfect without seeming stiff. "The facilities are well-maintained and strategically positioned. The training grounds show evidence of consistent use, and the defensive perimeter appears adequate for its intended purpose."

Dionysus finally looked up properly, his gaze sharpening as he took in Philip's delicate features and composed demeanor. A crude smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, the kind of expression that usually preceded an inappropriate comment. "Well, well. Aren't you a pretty little thing. I bet you're quite popular with the boys back in—"

"Dionysus," Chiron interrupted sharply, his tone carrying clear disapproval and a warning that even a god would be wise to heed.

But Percy could see something else flickering in both men's eyes—a careful observation, as if they were sensing something unusual about Philip that went beyond mere appearance. The way Chiron's fingers drummed once against his desk, the slight tilt of Dionysus's head as he studied Philip more intently, suggested they were picking up on power signatures that didn't quite fit their expectations.

Dionysus leaned forward slightly, his casual demeanor sharpening into something more focused and genuinely curious. "So, kid. Another demigod, are we? Who's your divine parent?" His eyes narrowed with sudden suspicion, and his voice took on a more serious edge. "You're not mine, are you?"

Philip remained silent for a moment, but Percy recognized the look that came over his partner's face—the same analytical expression that had preceded his comprehensive introduction to Drew, the look that meant Philip was about to demonstrate exactly how much he knew about the people he was talking to.

"Dionysus," Philip began in his matter-of-fact tone, apparently unaware of or unconcerned with the potential social minefield he was about to walk into, "also known as Bacchus in Roman mythology. God of wine, vegetation, pleasure, festivity, madness, and wild frenzy. Son of Zeus and the mortal princess Semele. Currently serving as camp director at Camp Half-Blood as punishment for a romantic indiscretion with a wood nymph, sentenced to one hundred years of sobriety and babysitting demigods."

Percy tensed, his hands gripping the arms of his chair, but didn't interrupt this time. The office was warded—sound wouldn't carry beyond these walls, and if they were going to work with the camp authorities, partial truth was more dangerous than full disclosure.

Philip's gaze shifted to Chiron with the same analytical precision. "Chiron, son of the Titan Kronos and the sea nymph Philyra. Renowned centaur trainer of heroes, mentor to figures including Achilles, Jason, Asclepius, and countless others throughout Greek mythology. Accidentally wounded by Heracles with an arrow dipped in Hydra poison, trading his immortality to Prometheus to escape eternal agony. Currently serves as activities director at Camp Half-Blood, tasked with training and protecting demigod children."

The silence that followed was profound and heavy with implications. Dionysus's Diet Coke can remained frozen halfway to his lips, while Chiron sat perfectly still, his usual paternal warmth replaced by something far more cautious and analytical.

Percy caught Philip's eye, and they exchanged one of their silent communications—a question asked and answered in a single look. Philip gave an almost imperceptible nod. It was the logical choice. If they were going to investigate effectively, they needed the camp's authorities to understand exactly what they were dealing with.

Percy straightened in his chair, his voice taking on the professional tone he used for serious cases, the voice that commanded attention and respect. "Philip isn't a demigod."

The can slipped from Dionysus's fingers, hitting the floor with a metallic clatter that echoed through the suddenly tense room like a gunshot.

Percy continued steadily, his words measured and deliberate. "He's connected to something called the Gaia Library—a repository of all knowledge and memories that exist within the Earth itself. Every experience, every piece of information, every fragment of history is accessible to him."

Chiron's knuckles had gone white where they gripped the arms of his wheelchair, and he was staring at Philip with the expression of someone who had just realized they were sitting across from a force of nature made manifest.

"That's how he knew those details about both of you," Percy explained, his tone remaining calm and professional despite the magnitude of what he was revealing. "It's not research or investigation in any conventional sense. He has direct access to the Earth's memory of everything that has ever happened."

Dionysus remained frozen, his usual sardonic demeanor completely absent for perhaps the first time since Percy had known him. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper, carrying an awe that bordered on fear.

"You're talking about primordial power. Power that predates the Olympians. Power that..." He trailed off, apparently unable to finish the thought, his mind grappling with implications too vast to fully comprehend.

Chiron's voice was carefully controlled when he finally spoke, each word chosen with the precision of someone who understood the gravity of the moment. "Philip, when you access this... library... what exactly do you experience?"

Philip tilted his head slightly, considering the question with his usual analytical approach, apparently unaware of or unconcerned with the tension he had just created. "I perceive information as it exists within Gaia's consciousness. Natural phenomena, historical events, personal experiences of individuals—all stored as data within the Earth's memory matrix. The process is instantaneous and comprehensive."

"All of it?" Chiron asked, and there was something almost awed in his voice, the tone of someone confirming something that challenged everything they thought they knew about the world. "Every memory, every secret, every—"

"Everything that has occurred within Gaia's domain," Philip confirmed with a slight nod. "Though I should note that accessing certain types of information can be... taxing. Traumatic memories or events of significant magical power require more effort to process."

Dionysus slowly retrieved his fallen can, his movements uncharacteristically careful and deliberate. When he looked at Philip again, his expression held a mixture of wariness and something that might have been grudging respect.

"And you've been using this to... what? Play detective?" he asked, though his tone suggested he was beginning to understand that this was far more serious than he had initially assumed.

"We've been investigating criminal organizations that were exploiting Gaia's power through artificial memory devices," Percy explained, his voice taking on the rhythm of someone delivering a case briefing. "Philip's abilities were crucial in understanding how these technologies worked and ultimately shutting down their operations."

Chiron leaned back in his wheelchair, clearly struggling to process the implications of what he'd just learned, his mind working through centuries of experience and wisdom to find a framework for understanding this unprecedented situation. "The scope of what you're describing... Philip, you essentially have access to the memories of the Earth herself."

"A simplified but accurate description," Philip agreed, as if they were discussing something as mundane as the weather rather than power that could reshape the relationship between gods and mortals.

The camp director's gaze shifted to Percy, his expression mixing concern with growing understanding. "And you're investigating the theft of Zeus's Master Bolt and Hades's Helm of Darkness using these abilities."

"We're trying," Percy said, allowing some of his frustration to show through his professional demeanor. "Though the trail is nearly a year cold. That's why we need the camp's cooperation. If there were any unusual events, any strange visitors or incidents around the time of the thefts, Philip might be able to access memories related to those events."

Dionysus set his can down with deliberate care, his expression more serious than Percy had ever seen it, all traces of his usual flippant attitude replaced by genuine concern. "Kid—Percy—what you're telling us... if word of this gets out, if Zeus learns that someone with this level of access to primordial power is walking around..." He shook his head slowly, the gesture carrying the weight of divine politics and ancient fears. "You thought the Master Bolt situation was dangerous?"

Chiron nodded grimly, his expression carrying the weight of millennia of experience with divine politics and godly paranoia. "The gods are already on edge about potential threats to their authority. Someone with unfettered access to all of Gaia's knowledge would be seen as..." He paused, searching for the right words that could capture the magnitude of the threat this would represent. "Well. Let's just say Zeus doesn't react well to perceived challenges to Olympian supremacy."

Percy felt a chill run down his spine, remembering Grover's warnings about Zeus's paranoia and the way the sky seemed to darken whenever the king of the gods was mentioned. "Which is exactly why we need to solve this case quickly and quietly," he said, his voice carrying the urgency he felt building inside him. "The longer this drags out, the more likely it becomes that someone will discover Philip's true nature."

"And what happens then?" Dionysus asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer and wasn't looking forward to hearing it confirmed.

The question hung in the air, unanswered but understood by everyone in the room. Percy looked at Philip, seeing his partner's calm exterior and knowing that beneath it lay power that could reshape the balance between gods and mortals, power that could make him a target or a weapon depending on who discovered it first.

They were walking a razor's edge, and the stakes had just become infinitely higher.

## **Night Report**

That evening, Grover knocked quietly on the door of the Poseidon cabin before letting himself in. The sound was soft but carried clearly in the evening stillness, and Percy and Philip looked up from their case files, noting the nervous energy radiating from their satyr ally even from across the room.

"I've got something," Grover announced without preamble, settling into the familiar chair they'd designated as his during their strategy sessions. There was an excitement in his voice that hadn't been there before, mixed with his usual nervous energy. "It's not much, but it's a lead."

Philip closed his laptop with a soft click and pulled out a notepad, ready to record whatever intelligence Grover had gathered. Percy leaned back in his chair, giving Grover his full attention while his mind shifted into the focused state he used for receiving new information.

"There's been talk among my contacts about Ares being in a particularly foul mood ever since last Winter Solstice," Grover began, his fingers fidgeting with the edge of his shirt. "I mean, more than his usual level of irritability. Like, significantly worse."

"In what way?" Percy asked, his detective instincts sharpening as he sensed they were about to get their first real break in the case.

Grover fidgeted with the hem of his shirt before answering, clearly working up his nerve to share information that felt significant. "I have a contact who works as a valet for Ares—brings in his motorcycle, maintains his gear, that sort of thing. He overheard Ares grumbling about 'some punk kid' on multiple occasions, always with this really angry tone."

Percy and Philip exchanged a look, both recognizing the potential importance of this information. This was the first concrete lead they'd had since starting the investigation.

"Could he have been referring to one of his own children?" Percy suggested, his mind automatically running through possibilities. "Maybe one of them did something to displease him?"

Grover shook his head emphatically, his certainty clear in his voice and body language. "That's what I thought at first, but no. If Ares was angry at one of his kids, he wouldn't just call them a 'punk kid.' He'd call them much worse things—probably involving creative descriptions of their fighting abilities and questionable parentage. You know how he is."

Philip made a note, his pen moving with precise strokes across the page. "The specificity of the language suggests someone outside his immediate family circle."

Percy felt pieces clicking into place in his mind, the way they always did when a case started to break open, like tumblers falling into alignment in a complex lock. "Ares," he said slowly, standing and beginning to pace as his thoughts gained momentum. "The God of War."

He moved around the small space of their makeshift office, his mind working through the implications with increasing speed. "Whoever orchestrated the thefts would want conflict among the Olympians. Even if they're family—especially because they're family—someone would benefit from discord regardless of the outcome, as long as there was chaos."

Philip nodded, following Percy's logic with the ease of someone who had worked through countless cases with him. "A war between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades would destabilize the entire pantheon. The resulting power vacuum could be exploited by someone positioned to take advantage of the confusion."

"And who better to benefit from war than the God of War himself?" Percy concluded, turning to face his partners with the satisfaction of someone who had just found the key piece of a puzzle.

Grover looked between his two friends, his expression a mixture of excitement and apprehension, his hooves shifting nervously against the cabin floor. "So you think Ares is our thief?"

"It fits the profile perfectly," Percy replied, his voice carrying the confidence that came from solid deductive reasoning. "He'd have the means to access both Olympus and the Underworld, the knowledge to bypass security measures, and most importantly, the motivation to see his fellow gods tear each other apart."

Philip tapped his pen against his notepad in a rhythm that Percy recognized as his thinking pattern. "The timeline also supports this theory. Ares's increased agitation began immediately after the Winter Solstice—precisely when the thefts would have been discovered."

Percy stopped pacing and turned to Grover with genuine appreciation, the kind of respect he reserved for solid police work. "This is solid intelligence, Grover. Thank you."

The satyr's face brightened at the praise, his nervous energy transforming into something more purposeful and determined. "I'll keep digging. My contact mentioned that Ares has been making more trips to unusual locations lately. I might be able to get more specific information about where he's been going."

After Grover left, promising to report back with any additional findings and moving with more confidence than Percy had seen from him since they'd arrived at camp, Philip and Percy sat in contemplative silence for several minutes. The cabin felt charged with the energy of a case finally gaining momentum, the kind of electric anticipation that came when the hunt was truly beginning.

"What's our next move?" Philip asked, closing his notepad and looking at Percy with the focused attention of someone ready to act.

Percy looked at his partner, a slow smile spreading across his face—the kind of predatory grin he got when he could finally see the shape of his quarry. "We now have a lead. Tomorrow, we pay a visit to the Ares cabin."

## **Morning Preparation**

The next morning, Percy was gathering his jacket and preparing to leave when something sailed through the air toward him with perfect accuracy. He caught it reflexively, his fingers recognizing the familiar texture of black felt before his eyes confirmed what Philip had thrown to him.

His fedora. The one he'd worn during their cases in Futo, the one that had become as much a part of his detective identity as his analytical approach and measured demeanor. The hat that had seen him through countless interrogations, stakeouts, and confrontations with criminals who thought they were smarter than they actually were.

Percy looked at Philip, who was adjusting his own jacket with characteristic precision, every movement deliberate and purposeful in the way that suggested he was preparing for something important. Philip's expression was focused but carried a hint of anticipation that Percy had learned to read as excitement about a case finally moving forward.

Standing together in the doorway of their makeshift office, surrounded by the familiar tools of their trade and the comfortable chaos of active investigation, Percy placed the hat on his head with deliberate ceremony. The gesture transformed him from Percy Jackson, uncertain demigod still finding his place in the mythological world, back into Percy Jackson, hardboiled detective with a case to solve.

"Let's do this hardboiled," he declared, and his voice carried the confidence and determination that had gotten him through the most dangerous moments of his career.

Philip's mouth curved into what might have been the ghost of a smile, the closest thing to obvious emotion Percy had ever seen on his partner's usually composed features. "Lead the way, partner."

They walked out into the morning sun, two figures moving with the quiet confidence of professionals who had finally found their target, ready to begin the hunt that would either solve the case or lead them deeper into a conspiracy that threatened the stability of the entire mythological world.