**Part 7**

**In which I receive poor customer service.**

Thankfully, once we were out of there, the distant caw-ing cries tapered off, whatever the Monsters had used to track Percy *right to his bus* no longer working. I really, *really* wanted to have a talk with someone who understood this place’s metaphysics, as *I* knew just enough to follow the conversation, not, for lack of a better term, ‘*diagnose*’ it to start things off to begin with. That said, a couple of questions lobbied Annabeth’s way, the act of imparting knowledge centering for Athena’s daughter, told me that a ‘build, conflict, release, repeat’ cycle was fairly standard, it just wasn’t supposed to happen *this fast,* nor *this hard*.

And from her comment on *outside factors*, and her significant look my way, she at least in part blamed *me* for this, not believing my statement about my being ‘untraceable’ until Grover, surprisingly, backed me up, and commented on how, even *now*, I felt like a mortal, which was actually freaking him out a little, because *who else was doing the same thing,* which, in turn, actually niggled at *another* question I had, but first thing’s first.

Which was… *why did we get away?*

I mean, if it was just me, I’d *absolutely get why,* Company **Defenses** being *Conceptual Bullshit*, but the others?

Trying to feel out the others, my metaphysical senses were still very much *new*, and being at Camp Half-Blood, while educative in many ways, *not all of them good,* it hadn’t helped me *this* way as the place was *teeming* with Demigods, so all their energies got… *muddled*, for lack of a better term.

Annabeth was very much carrying herself in an Athenian way: Tall, proud, and cut off from her surroundings. Very much *in* the world, but not *of* it, to borrow the Christian phrase, not that I thought the deity would appreciate the comparison, *which was another reason to use it.*

Percy, meanwhile, was a spiritual *bonfire,* only in the opposite direction, elementally speaking. He was very much… *not subtle,* and if he dried off it’d probably abate a bit, but he *hadn’t the last time*, and yet everything had worked out.

Grover, on the other hand, being a Satyr, while *still* suffering from after-battle shocks, was still somewhat at home in the forest, his spiritual presence meshing, a bit, with the surroundings, which *may* be what was hiding the others in turn.

During the fight, however, *everyone* had been calling upon themselves to do what they could, and that kind of action could leave… *traces*. Traces that Monsters would be drawn to, heading to the site of that battle, and *not* on the leaving (likely retreating) Heroes, who, tired and possibly injured, did not give off nearly as much evidence of their passage away from the arena in question, and would thus be overlooked.

Though whether it was distance, or the recovery of the Heroes *themselves*, burning brightly once more and ready for combat, that brought on the next ‘challenge’ was something I’d need a lot more research to figure out.

However, that very trace, *or lack thereof,* was likely the same thing that had thrown off the Furies, as *every* instinct they had labelled me as ‘cannon fodder, at most’, even when I was *punching them in the face.*

Because even the most stealth-aligned Demigod wouldn’t be able to keep that shit up *in the middle of combat*, at least without a lot of ancillary effects that would tip the batty combatants off that something supernatural was going on, while I was just… plain, at least according to their senses.

Which, amusingly, was *another* way this Alecto had failed compared to the other, because, while the Teaching Assistant I’d… *gotten along with,* didn’t have the same Tulpa-esque immortality as the one I’d just *beat to shit*, and whom Percy had ‘killed’, she was a much more *technical* fighter, and would’ve taken me seriously regardless.

Then again, my Alecto would’ve *started* with blowing up the bus in an explosion of black and crimson cursed flame, innocent casualties be damned, so… honestly, fighting the inferior version was the better outcome here.

Letting the kids take the lead, all three of them quiet, I noticed that, while I’d been trained in how to walk in a straight line in a forest, which, yes, *was a skill*, the three in front of me kept trying to veer off into another direction. The *same* direction. And, opening my mouth to point out the issue, there was a *faint* stirring, a **Defense** subtly active, which *was* a cause for concern, yet given the protections I was rocking, if it were something more overt, like **Mind Defense**, it’d *feel* more overt. This… this was *subtle,* which meant it was likely ***Destiny Defense****,* at the Resistance level, which was gently stirring as I considered *not* going where we were supposed to.

It'd likely been active when I’d effectively invited myself along on this trip, but I’d been so nervous about how I’d pull the last confrontation off, I hadn’t noticed. *Now*, though… well, Percy *had* received a Prophecy, hadn’t he?

And while the *best* prophecies were made with glimpses of true omniscience, that was… *haaard,* so most Oracles *cheated*, either into tapping into the strings of Fate, or ensnaring their target themselves, usually *during* the prophecy ‘reading’ process.

It was something I’d been aware of, which is why I’d picked *up* that *very* costly **Defense**, but, then again, it was also a factor in the *Tier* of this world, which was where I’d derived my starting budget in the first place.

And the children were definitely being *guided*, though, if I was right, especially given the *lack* of such a feeling previously, the Fate Shenanigans were merely to set the stage. Once the shooting started, so to speak, it was *all* them, pass, *or fail*.

*Be nice if they included a save point, and maybe a health pack possibly, even an ammo resupply,* I mused, but, no, any world that started to align such a way became *Eldritch*, and *not* in the Cthulhu way, which, more often than not, was, surprisingly, *not a good thing.*

“*Three Kindly Ones*,” Grover brayed, finally breaking the silence. “All at *once*.”

“And if we hadn’t given Gene our bags,” Percy added, “we would’ve lost our food, our money, our *everything.”*

“Not necessarily,” Anna argued. “If he hadn’t *attacked* them, they might’ve let us go.”

That got a derisive snort from me, “That experienced with *Furies*, are you?”

“I have more experience than *you!”* the girl shot back. “I didn’t need your help. *Either* of your help,” she added, glaring at Percy. “We would’ve been fine.”

“Sliced like sandwich bread,” Grover sarcastically agreed. “But fine.”

*“Shut up, goat boy,”* the girl spat. “I would’ve found a way.”

“Bull-*shit* you would’ve!” I informed her, cutting this off right now. “Annabeth, I don’t mean this as a threat, but I could kill you in about five seconds, and while I’m good, the Furies were *better,* only the fact that the fliers were stuck in a *cramped metal tube* letting me pull off what I did without going very, *very* loud, and even then, they were distracted. They weren’t there to kill us, Anna, at least until right at the end. No, they were looking for something.”

“What?” she asks, and I give her a significant look. “But we don’t *have* it. We’re trying to *find* the bolt!”

Lifting an eyebrow, I questioned, “And with *all* of your ‘superior experience’ with the Furies, tell me, are they the type to *believe you?”*

Rather than answer me, and admit fault, the 12-year-old girl huffed, turned around, and continued to walk into the forest with a determination that I *knew* was baseless, as far as *her* skills were concerned.

Though, as she *was* a child, I didn’t really hold it against her, as we continued onwards, away from the city, the sun, hidden by the still ongoing storm, distantly setting, causing the forest to darken more and more as we continued.

“Percy,” she said after a bit, hesitating.

“Yeah, Annabeth?” the boy answered, bedraggled, and a bit shellshocked by the combat, but, soaking wet, he was still going strong.

“I, look, I…” she fell silent for a moment. “I appreciate you coming back for us, okay? Gene *wasn’t* handling it, no matter what he says, and, and that, that was really brave.”

Poseidon’s son glanced my way, but I just rolled my eyes, smiling. The boy returned the expression, announcing, “We’re a team, right?”

I gave the tween a solid nod, but the blonde girl didn’t say anything else for a little bit, Percy about to say something when she stated, “It’s just that if you died… aside from the fact it would really *suck* for you, it would mean the quest was over. This may be my only chance to see the real world.”

Well, that was… *a thing.*

As the forest darkened, I, concentrating, summoned a flame to my hand, causing the other three to start, Annabeth moving to draw her blade, Percy’s hand going to the pocket with his ‘pen’, before they realized I was just lighting the way.

Concentrating on it, and, fucking a bit with the odd chorus of divinity that dwelt within me, taking that dry, sun-bleached feeling and intertwining it into the Hurakan-bloodline created flame, the orange-yellow ball of fire flickering, the two struggling against each other, until, bringing my *Odin* self to bear, I got the two to harmonize, but it still wasn’t enough, so a touch of **Eros** bridged the gap. At that point, the ball of flame shrank, yet simultaneously brightened, which the *Hecate* part of me didn’t really care for, but *fuck it*, getting *two* of my aspects to play nice together was hard enough, so I wasn’t too chuffed that the bit of me that was, among other things, stemming from the ‘Goddess’ of Night didn’t care for what might actually be metaphysically *daylight.*

That said, the Titaness turned Goddess’ portfolio was a lot more spread out then her *original* status as the Titaness of Magic, as attempting to be ***Night*** at that level would very much step on ***NYX****’s* toes, that being second only to ***CHAOS*** *itself*, and technically either my aunt, grandmother, or *great* grandmother, depending on how everything unfolded.

Divine Genealogies got *weird,* okay?

And then there was the fact that, after a certain point, the Protogenoi… weren’t *really* Titans, the same way that Titans weren’t *really* Gods, but… more so.

A *lot* more so.

My *point* was, *Magic* was Hekate’s bread, butter, *and* jam, with everything else she was later tacked on, weakening her specialization in the process, but to fit in with the Greek God Gang, she had to have some… *metaphysically reconstructive surgery.*

Something that my *actual* father didn’t bother with, as above the Titans that fought the Greek Gods as the Greek Gods were to their *Demigod offspring.* Which is why I could *fistfight the Furies*, even if they would’ve still kicked my fuckin’ ass in a fair fight, but, if you were in a fair fight with *the Furies,* you’d both fucked up, *and* were an idiot.

Regardless, I was now the proud owner of a mini-sun, as glancing back my way, the daughter of Athena asked, “What does fire have to do with creation?”

“I don’t know, what does making stars have to do with making the universe?” I shrugged.

“That’s not…” she started to argue, paused, then questioned instead, “is that safe?”

“Safer than fighting the Furies,” I answered brightly. “Don’t worry, if I lose containment, I’ll blast the part of the forest *without* you in it!”

“… thanks,” the girl said dryly, which is when I realized *I* was dry, the microstar a *little* hotter than I meant it to be, and tamped it down, dimming everything, but still letting us see easily.

Percy, sensing the awkwardness, questioned of the blonde, “You said this was your only chance to see the world? You mean you haven’t left Camp Half-Blood since you were seven?”

“No… only short field trips,” she answered, seizing the new topic. “My dad-”

“The history professor,” Poseidon’s son interrupted.

“Yeah. It didn’t work out living at home,” she answered, wincing and quickly correcting, “I mean, Camp Half-Blood *is* my home. At camp you train and train. And that’s all cool and everything, but the real world is where the Monsters are. That’s where you learn whether you’re good or not.”

From her tone, Annabeth wasn’t sure which category she fell into, Percy offering, “You’re pretty good with that knife.”

“You think so?” Athena’s daughter perked up.

“Anyone who can kill a Fu-er, a ‘Kindly One’ is okay by me,” he replied, catching himself.

“Question,” I interceded. “Once you grow into your powers, do you leave camp?”

“Everyone does,” she answered. “We have councilors that go to college, and visit during the summer, but-”

A warbling, tortured cry split the air.

We looked at Grover.

“Uh… sorry. But my reed pipes still work!” he offered. “If I can remember a ‘Find Path’ song, I could lead us out!”

“Work on that, but… *quietly,*” I ordered, looking back to the girl. “And what happens after they leave?”

Annabeth frowned. “I… I don’t know. Once they leave, like *leave* leave, no one ever comes back. Not even to visit. Luke’s nineteen, and is almost old enough that, well, no one *has* to leave, but they always do, and then… I’m sure he’ll be fine. But the camp’s really only for kids. Until they’re strong enough to handle things. And, uh, *you*, apparently.”

Which, if I was feeling charitable, could be interpreted as the Demigods being strong enough to handle what came for them, and going out into the world to make their way, never to return, like birds leaving the nest.

Having been in this world for longer than a week, however, I *wasn’t.*

While I knew my own ‘welcoming party’ was… *extreme,* I was also aware how I could fight *circles* around most of the campers I’d seen, as, while they might have more skill in sparring with a weapon, especially against other humanoid targets, a *large* number of Monsters… *weren’t*.

And all it took was walking into the wrong coffee shop to meet one’s end.

Worse, if they doubled up, formed a team, that would likely *double* the trouble they faced, which, while viable… was undercut by one important fact.

*Demigods couldn’t use phones.*

Now, email and texting *might* be a workaround, as, with magic, it not being their *literal* voice might be enough to insulate them… or it could just as easily still count for the Monster-attracting curse they all lived under.

And never being able to call *anyone* except for when you were in a safe zone, of which the *only one they knew of was Camp Half-Blood*, well, *have fun getting a job*.

No… I had a feeling there was a reason Demigods never came back to Camp Half-Blood. Possibly several. The nicest of which was that it was a *divine watering hole,* so any that visited would have to be *exceedingly* careful in how they exfiltrated, lest they stumble across the Monster Central that was NYC.

More likely, however, they didn’t visit because they *couldn’t.*

*Yep. Fuckin’ Death World.*

I was vaguely aware that, at the end of this book, Annabeth would go visit her family and try living with them again, but, that was the thing, it wasn’t an *instant* death world, like fucking *Catachan*, the simulation of that green hell having wiped out our *entire fucking Seminar* in an *hour*, but, well, one could wander even a place like Remnant for *days* before the Grimm found you.

At which point, if you didn’t have a *magical* weapon… better to kill yourself, and make it quick.

Which meant I needed to get the points to up my Apartment to a **Sweet Home**, and then expand it, if only to give them someplace to live where *Misted Monsters couldn’t be lurking in every fucking corner.*

But, to do that, I needed points.

Which, if the neon lights in the distance were any indication of, I might be receiving soon enough.

Dismissing my star, Percy promptly tripping over a branch and going down in the underbrush, I winced, offering a, “Sorry, should’ve warned you. We’ve got something ahead. Don’t move for a minute to let your eyes adjust.”

*I* could see it just fine, but, then again, **Wild Defense** conferred a bit of darkvision, to handle naturally dim surroundings, as travelling the ocean depths, yet being unable to *see* anything, was somewhat counter-intuitive, though I’d need the upgraded **Environmental Defense** before I could ignore pesky things like ‘breathing’ and ‘solar radiation’, at least in ways my own divine nature didn’t already handle.

“Hmm, I smell *food,*” Grover whispered wistfully, Percy, now upright, mm-hmming in agreement, and, while I could see Annabeth *wanted* to be superior and disagree, she couldn’t bring herself to.

It wasn’t to say Camp Half-Blood’s standard fare was *bad,* but it was *basic,* and while grapes, bread, cheese, and the *leanest* barbecue I’d ever had were certainly *healthy*, giving everyone the physique of, coincidentally, a *Greek God,* I had a feeling that, with Divinity involved, we could eat far worse without any ill effects.

After all, I’d yet to see a *fat* Demigod.

Regardless, I’d been *very* happy to have access to my own self-stocking kitchen.

Moving forward, once they could see, led us to a deserted two-lane road, which, *this* close to NYC, ***shouldn’t happen****,* along with a closed down, abandoned gas station, and a tattered billboard for extolling Romeo + Juliet, coming out October twenty-seventh, which, if I remembered right, released a *decade* prior.

And, casting the neon light, was a single open business.

Not a diner, despite the smell, but a curio shop, the main building a warehouse, and the lawn was *covered* with statuary, which, while bad, was made *infinitely* worse by the *fucking sign.*

“What the heck does that say?” Percy questioned.

“I don’t know,” Wisdom’s daughter frowned, and I glanced at them, confused before I remembered, *right, demigod dyslexia.*

“It’s ‘Aunty Em’s Garden Gnome Emporium’,” I translated, receiving a thankful smile from Percy, and an annoyed look from Anna, but, *nope, neither of them made the connection*.

Poseidon’s son started walking towards the door, even as Grover, balking, called out, *“Hey…”*

“The lights are on inside,” Annabeth stated. “Maybe it’s open.”

*“Snack bar,”* Percy almost moaned in anticipation.

*“Snack bar,”* the girl echoed in agreement.

“Are you two crazy?” Grover demanded. “This place is *weird!* Gene, wh-” he paused as I turned to look at him, wincing under my gaze, but pressed on, *“what do you think?”*

Pausing to check my own suite of protections, I slowly stated, “They’re not being controlled, or if they are it’s narrowly banded, and I’m just here to handle things once you guys get in *real* trouble, like before. This *is* Percy’s quest, so I’m willing to follow his lead.”

The satyr nodded, understanding, even if he didn’t like it, before scampering after the other two, falling backwards as he belated, *“Bla-ha-ha! Looks like my Uncle Ferdinand!”*

*Because it* ***is*** *your Uncle Ferdinand,* I thought, but… God, was *this* the Mist at work too? I wanted to believe it was just youthful stupidity, and, re-wrapping myself in it, while the statues didn’t look *quite* so lifelike, the clues were all *still there,* but, then again, my foreknowledge may be inoculating me to its effects.

Which would be… *goddamned insidious*, if it were true, but the three of them *were* twelve years old, or the equivalent, so, lacking more data, I’d chock this up to naivete.

“*Don’t knock,”* Grover pleaded, as they all reached the front door, and I came up behind them. “I smell monsters, and Gene said to trust my instincts!”

“Your nose is clogged up from the Furies,” Annabeth dismissed, adding, at Percy’s look, “It’s a descriptor, not their actual names. It’s fine” Looking back to the satyr, she added, “All I smell is burgers. Aren’t you hungry?”

*“Meat!”* the nature spirit automatically dismissed in turn, *not helping his case of rational distrust.* “I’m a vegetarian.”

“You eat cheese enchiladas and aluminum cans,” Percy pointed out.

I chimed in, “Vegetarian means nothing gets *hurt*, but animal byproducts like dairy, and possibly even eggs, are fine. You’re thinking of vegans.”

“Yeah, I’m not *crazy,*” Grover agreed. “But, saying that, let’s leave. These statues are… *looking* at me.”

They were *not,* but before anyone could answer, a tall woman, heavily veiled, though her eyes still glinted behind her coverings, opened the door, her hands a dark brown, and, *yes, finely scaled*. When she spoke, it was with a hiss that sounded almost Middle Eastern, as she asked, “Yes, can I help you?” She peered past us, and noted the empty street. “Are you having trouble?”

“Uh, yeah, we’re… um…” Annabeth stammered, suddenly uneasy.

“We’re orphans!” Percy lied with surprising ease.

“Orphans?” the Monster cooed. “But, my dears, surely not! And who is this with you?”

“He’s our chaperone!” the black-haired boy responded, not missing a beat. “We got separated from our caravan. Our circus caravan. The Ringmaster said to meet him at the gas station if we got lost, but he may have forgotten, or maybe he meant a different gas station. Anyways, we’re lost. Is that food I smell?”

The woman looked to me, and I rolled my eyes, “Our bus broke down a while back, we called ahead, and the trip manager said to meet at the shell station. These three insisted on taking a shortcut that, well, *was not short*. If you do sell food, I can pay, as something better than granola bars sounds lovely right now.”

“Oh, of course,” the Monster nodded. “You all must come in, you poor children, to be out in the storm, what were you thinking. I am Aunty Em. Go straight through to the back of the warehouse, please. There is a dining area.”

Offering our thanks, we moved on, and I couldn’t help but notice as our ‘host’ locked the door behind us.

*“Circus Caravan?”* Annabeth hissed at the boy.

“Always have a strategy, right?” he replied with a smile. “Better than nothing.”

*“Your head is full of* ***kelp****,”* she shot back, glancing my way, “And don’t encourage him!”

Grover walked with us, looking fearfully around, as I advised, “Any story you tell you need to back up. Travelling Circus is… iffy, unless you’ve got some tricks you can pull out to back it up. I could fire juggle, and he could just kick off his shoes,” I gestured to the satyr keeping a few steps in front of me, “but you two would need to figure out an act of your own.”

*“See, it’s iffy!”* the blonde affirmed.

“Eh, I’d figure out something. And you could do your Hacky Sack routine! It’s *really* cool!” Percy smiled, and, in the face of honest praise, the girl had no choice but to look away and drop the subject. And, sure enough, there *was* a mini food court at the back, a bit like an old-timey gas station’s setup, with not only a pretzel heater and nacho cheese dispenser, but a soda fountain and a small grill.

I wondered what this place had been *originally*, before its new ‘owner’ had set up her lair inside it.

It was only by the displacement of air that I felt ‘Aunty Em’ move up behind us, the woman urging us, “Please, sit down.”

“Awesome,” Percy smiled, taking a seat, even as Grover tried not to jump.

“I don’t see any prices listed,” I observed, feeling *something* shift, the Mist *particularly* thick here.

“No, no,” the Monster cooed. “No money. This is special case, yes? It is my treat, for such nice orphans.

“Thank you, ma’am,” the daughter of Athena replied, honestly grateful.

Which is what made the Monster’s momentary stiffness all the more telling.

“Quite all right, Annabeth,” the woman stated, musing, despite none of us using her name. “You have such beautiful gray eyes, child,” she pronounced, before darting away with surprising speed, heading for the cooking area.

Keeping an eye out, watching our host through the reflections in the pretzel-heater’s glass, I had to hand it to her, she was a skilled chef, or at least line cook, and a deft hand with all of her culinary tools, serving up four sets of double cheeseburgers, vanilla shakes, and a basket of fries for each of us, the extra-crunchy kind you could only get at diners.

Even better, *none of it was poisoned*, my **Defenses** not even quivering in the slightest, as I smiled towards the woman, “Thank you for your hospitality, Madam. If you won’t take payment in coin, perhaps stories. Did you know that New York City is suffering a great storm right now? We’re just outside the edges of it, but it’s been raging for days, as if the very heavens themselves have been angered.”

“Oh?” the Monster questioned. “I have heard of something, but, away from others as I am, not many come to bring news.”

*Gee, I wonder why,* I thought, eating a few more fries, her cooking *truly* excellent, though nothing *godly.*

***Drink?***

*No.*

“What’s that hissing noise?” the satyr seated beside me questioned, nervous.

“Hissing?” the woman questioned, the noise low, though louder whenever she glanced towards Anna. “Perhaps you hear the deep-fryer oil. You have keen ears, Grover.”

“I take vitamins,” the *mental* teenager responded, reddening, “For my ears.

Clearly trying not to laugh, the hissing of dozens of snakes momentarily louder, before they were repressed, Aunty Em noted, “That’s admirable. But please, relax.”

“If you don’t mind cooking, and wish visitors, perhaps take an ad out? Or contact a few food critics in the city?” I suggested. “This is *truly* exquisite, and, even as out of the way as you are, I could see *hundreds* coming for sustenance of this quality.”

“Ah, *statuary* is my true calling. But I thank you,” the Monster deferred. “I have to ask. How did… someone like *you*, end up with children like *them?*”

*Mist isn’t feeding you* ***shit*** *about me, is it?* I wondered, as her knowing Anna’s name, or Percy’s, while a stretch, was doable.

But a random Satyr’s?

Either this was a setup, which was… *not outside the realm of possibility*, or she was being *given* information about us, to better ‘hunt’ us, which…

*Oh, part of me doesn’t want to do this, wants to leave peacefully, but the rest of me is getting pissed off by all the blatant fuckin’* ***bullshit*** *on display.*

“When kids are in trouble, isn’t the duty of adults to help?” I questioned in turn, which wasn’t really an answer, *and we both knew it.*

But, to her, I was far, *far* stranger than the goat-boy, the hydrokinetic, or the… well I wasn’t sure what Annabeth could actually do, yet, but that was a discussion for later.

“Most would say so. Yet few would off aid. Or follow them where they go,” the Monster commented.

“Yet more should, if this world is to improve,” I argued.

While I couldn’t *really* see her eyes, I got the sense they were narrowing in annoyance, and primed my Shroud, should her veil start to move, but other than the *slightest* of shifting, which ‘must’ve been the wind’, if there *were* any in this warehouse, it stayed where it was, the woman noting, in warning terms, “Helping others like that. It is often dangerous.”

“If it were safe, *everyone* would do it,” I replied instantly, and the tension between us grew.

Thing was, I appreciated the warning, I *really* did, which was why, if she backed off, points be damned, I’d wish her a nice day.

And if I’d been travelling with, say, Clarisse La Rue and Drew Tanaka, and wasn’t *that* a nightmare scenario, this Monster might’ve done just that, as she had no issue with Ares or Aphrodite.

But Athena and Poseidon?

The smart move would be to strike first, but… but there were *rules* to this, and, while I could pick up the proper **Defenses** to slip the leash of any curse, I didn’t have them *yet,* and, ultimately, some part of me *really* hoped this would work itself out, even if only due to my presence, as an adult oversight for these three.

Hell, if we ended on good enough terms, I might even make her an Offer.

However, being *realistic…* that wasn’t going to happen.

Percy, sensing the rising tension, questioned, “So, you sell gnomes?”

Giving me one last look, as I took a bite of *perfectly* prepared burger, ‘Aunty Em’ turned to tell him, “Oh, yes, and animals. And people. Anything for a garden. Custom orders. Statuary is *very* popular, you know.”

“A lot of business on this road?” the boy questioned, just trying to push the conversation along.

“Not so much, no. Since the highway was built… most cars, they do not go this way now,” she stated mournfully. “I must cherish every customer I get.”

“Seriously, market the food,” I advised. “As,” I gave the statuary a significant look, “your *primary* business doesn’t encourage repeat customers.”

The hiss coming from her picked up, Grover glancing over at the kitchen, trying to track the sound of the ‘fryer’, while Percy nodded. “Oh, yeah. A gnome or two is fine, but, like, thirty? It starts to look creepy.” He glanced about, “Though, uh, some of these are kinda already there.”

“Ah,” the Monster noted sadly. “You notice some of my creations do not turn out well. They are marred. They do not sell. The face is the hardest to get right. Always the face.”

Looking Annabeth’s way, the daughter of Athena frowned, but unfortunately didn’t make the connection that accidentally giving statues surprised, worried, or outright *terrified* expressions was *not how stone carving worked*.

At least if they *started* off as stone.

“You make these statues yourself?” the son of Poseidon questioned, actually getting interested now.

“Oh, yes,” the Monster nodded. “Once upon a time, I had two sisters to help me in the business, but they have passed on, and Aunty Em is alone. I have only my statues. This is why I make them, you see. They are my company.”

However, Anna, *finally,* realized something was deeply, *deeply* wrong, and echoed, voice strained, *“Two sisters?”*

“It’s a terrible story,” the woman replied, a touch of anger lying in wait underneath her otherwise mournful tone. “Not one for children, really. You see, Annabeth, a bad woman was jealous of me, long ago, when I was young. I had a… a boyfriend, you know, and this bad woman was determined to break us apart. She caused a terrible accident. My sisters stayed by me. They shared my bad fortune as long as they could, but eventually they passed on. They faded away. I alone have survived, but at a price. Such a price.”

*Faded away* was right, because who, *truly*, remembered Euryale and Stheno? And without that pressure, well, even that which cannot die could, should they allow themselves, be carried away on the ever-erosive tides of time.

That said, her ‘they are my company’ line was *absolute fucking bullshit*.

This was a *business.*

The blonde girl shot me a scared look, and I nodded, with an expression that hopefully read as ‘Yep. Finally got it?’ She *did,* as she turned, to her fellow demigod, who, after his post-battle high, the hike, and some *very* good food, was starting to nod off. *“Percy?”* she prompted, shaking him awake.

*“Such beautiful gray eyes,”* the monster cooed. “My, yes, it has been a long time since I’ve seen gray eyes like those.”

Our ‘host’ started to reach for Athena’s daughter, and I prepped my Shroud to strike, but the girl stood, declaring, “We really should go.”

*“Yes!”* Grover agreed, having eaten the wax paper our fries had come on. “The ringmaster is waiting! Right!”

I stood as well, about to *politely* beg off, when the Monster asked, “Please, dears. I so rarely get to be with children. Before you go, won’t you at least sit for a pose?”

“A pose?” Anna, who apparently had only *almost* figured things out, questioned.

“A photograph,” the Monster lied. “I will use it to model a new statue set. Children are so popular, you see. Everyone loves children.”

I spoke, tone low, and the Monster almost startled, so focused on the other three she’d forgotten I existed, “Ms. M, I thank you for *Xenia*, and would prefer to leave on peaceful terms. A *photograph* would be harmless, and,” I glanced towards Percy, “understandable. But *only* that.”

The irritation in her body language started to cross into *martial* territory, and the image of my improved combat suit firmed in my mind, the mental gun cocked, but-

“Sure we can sit,” Percy interrupted. “It’s just a photo, Annabeth, Gene. What’s the harm?”

“Yes, Annabeth… *Gene,”* the woman purred sibilantly. “No harm.”

We followed her out the front door, into the yard, and towards a stone bench, next to Grover’s Uncle Ferdinand. “Now,” the Monster directed, “I’ll just position you correctly. The young girl in the middle, I think, and the two gentlemen on either side. *Gene*, if you could stand over there?” she gestured away from the others.

They took their positions, and I sighed, not moving, sending my secondary Shroud into the grass, burrowing under until it came up directly behind her, like a dirt-colored mole, and spooled itself up, ready to go.

“Not much light for a photo,” Percy frowned.

“Oh, enough,” the woman smiled, faint, hissing laughter emanating from around her. “Enough for us to *see* each other, yes?”

“*Kids,*” I ordered, slowly walking in front of them, “Close your eyes and cover your faces. Do not look up. Consider this an Orpheus-like dry run. No matter what, *do not look.*”

From the stillness in the Monster’s form, she realized that, somehow, this ‘Mortal’ *knew who,* or to be more specific, ***what*** she was, but still tried to get her way, instructing, with a bit of heat, “Please, you are ruining the… *shot.* Go stand there. I will deal with you in a moment.

“Yeah… ***how bout no.***”

And, pulling the mental trigger, my clothing surged up, covering me in armor, up and over my face, my helmet booting up, my vision clarifying, showing my target clearly, as scaled, clawed hands balled up into enraged fists.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“You may call me Gene,” I responded calmly. “Now are you going to continue *lying*, or are you going to do what you wanted to this entire time, and show us that viper’s nest you call a face, [*Medusa*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr8ecoqJKJA&ab_channel=Pollux)*.”*

I could hear Annabeth gasp behind me, Grover bleating in fear, but, forming a backwards facing camera, and tossing its feed up on my HUD, yeah, none of them were looking. *Good.* I could reverse the Monster’s attack, but not easily, and not for a *while.*

“If you know who I am, you know better than to ask that, *Mortal,*” she hissed, hand going to her veil, and raising it. “But know you will pay for… what?”

I looked at her, and, yeah, while she wasn’t *Uma Therman,* and was very clearly inhuman, she wasn’t *terrible* looking. As for how I could see her, well, ‘Medusa Gaze’ was the *foundational example* to explain the nature of Conceptual Powers, because if you weren’t looking at her *directly*, then you were not ‘meeting her gaze’, and thus, were completely unaffected, even though that *wasn’t how photons functioned*.

And if some polished bronze worked, a *closed-circuit television system* was honestly overkill at that point.

“The Age of Gods is coming to a close, Medusa, and, with the proper tools, even a *Mortal* can challenge Monsters,” I stated, which… *wasn’t really what was happening here.*

As she reeled back in surprise, my secondary Shroud struck, ironically, *snake-like,* dozens of Celestial Bronze strands shooting out to wrap around the scaled woman, as I slowly walked forward. “Children, in *theory*, this should be a difficult fight, but instead is one I could handle on my own, *unlike* with the Furies. Medusa is what we like to call a *one-trick pony*. Strong, yes, but overly reliant on her, *admittedly deadly*, primary ability, which is why one always needs to *diversify*.”

And Medusa *was* strong, and tough, those claws of hers razor sharp, her snakes venomous, but with her limbs pulled back, eliminating her leverage, enough strands bound her all to easily, trivializing this confrontation, the Binding starting to take root, her restraints thickening as I pushed ***power*** into them, though I wasn’t entirely sure *how.*

*“You, you fool! I will return!”* the Monster spat.

“Perhaps,” I offered, “but, first, please indulge my curiosity, as myths and legends are… *not* known for their veracity. You laid with Poseidon, as a priestess of Athena, but to be clear, you did so at the shore, and *not* her temple, yes?”

“That is what my love wanted, yes,” she agreed, and I started to nod, but the Medusa wasn’t done. “However, I wanted that frigid *bitch* to *see* what she was missing!”

I paused, “I’m sorry, what?”

“That, that stuck up *cunt* thinks she’s so much better than everyone! That everyone else is *below her!* Do you *know* what serving her was like?” Medusa, who, *apparently*, needed to get this off her scaly chest, ranted.

“I mean, yes?” I shrugged. “Not as a C.O., but I’ve dealt with the type. And you couldn’t just leave because…”

The look of outrage on her scale face was impressive, as she tried to twist this way and that, but she was secured tightly. “I *tried!* You cannot ‘just leave’ the service of a god! I asked! As did my sisters! Do you know what we were told?”

Thinking on the Seminar that was *taught* by an Athena, though almost certainly not *this* Athena, I guessed, “Something patronizing, or matronizing, about how you were just a ‘foolish child’ that needed to listen to your ‘wiser, more intelligent betters’?”

Medusa paused in her struggling, “Then you understand!”

“Eh…” I wiggled a hand. “I’d understand if you said, ‘fuck this shit I’m out’, maybe took your sisters and went to go shack up with Poseidon to avoid her wrath. I’m assuming you did it *on her altar.*”

“I wanted to, but he refused,” the woman frowned. “We did it in front of her statue instead. So she could at least *watch.*” With a disgusted look towards Annabeth, she added, “But even now, she has not changed. At least with *me* my partner was pleasured. And *knew* he may have a child, though I was not blessed with one.”

Blinking, I turned to look at Annabeth. “Wait, you mean your parents never…”

Blushing *bright* red, hands still over her eyes, the daughter of Athena primly stated. “One. *Ew.* Two. *Ewww.* Three. *No.* I, I heard my father arguing with my stepmother about it. Also. Four. *Why are you talking to her!?”*

“Because primary sources are the best for research, even if they can be a bit biased,” I shrugged, turning back towards the bound, yet not *Bound*, Medusa. “So. *Fair point,* and Poseidon *really* should’ve refused to go with it, but the gods, as we’ve established, are kind of idiotic assholes at times. Athena should’ve just smited you, and going after your *family,* well, Euryale and Stheno *didn’t* deserve that shit. That said, *we didn’t deserve it either*.”

I sighed running a hand over my helmet. “*Fuck*, Medusa. I probably could’ve found a way to *un-curse* you, given enough time. But, nope you *had* to try and kill us, when we had done *nothing* to you. At least *you* spat in Athena’s face before she screwed you over, and possibly squirted in it.”

*“EWWW!”* Annabeth insisted.

“Perseus’ father was *very* skilled,” the monster preened, taking delight in, at least, embarrassing Athena-by-proxy.

“I, uh, didn’t need to know that,” the man’s son pointed out, sounding a little nauseous.

Extending my hands, dozens of Shroud threads reaching out, I stated formally, “Know this could’ve gone differently, Priestess. Because unlike those born monsters, like Chimeras, or made, like Colchis Bulls, those of us who were once people only become Monsters when we *choose* to be, and, by your actions, Athena didn’t truly turn you into one, she just gave you the power to turn your inner ugliness outwards. **Goodbye, Medusa, and best of luck wherever you end up.**”

“*Wha-ghgghghgck!”* the woman started to scream, but was gagged by Threads pouring down her throat, as the bindings spread, covering her completely.

Fun fact, the Binding Speed could be increased by several factors, being defeated was one, but another was for *each orifice penetrated*, which, yes, *kinda gross,* but in this case, as every snake that made up her hair had a mouth, vestigial as it was, those *still counted,* and, in seconds instead of an *hour*, I felt the internal *Click* as she was Captured, Selling her a moment later, the Shroud collapsing in on itself as it only held empty space, and was quickly dismissed.

“Okay, coast is clear,” I told them, shaking my head. “Medusa’s been dealt with.”

Hesitantly, the kids lowered their hands, looking around. “What, what happened to her?” Percy questioned.

“My father handles Creation,” I shrugged. “So I kicked her out of it.”

Annabeth stared, “You… what?”

Holding up a hand, I spun up a sphere of Shroud, and pulled her backpack out of storage within it. “So, same way I can pull this out,” I unfolded the threads, and tossed the bag to her, “Or put it away, only instead of holding onto it, I just yeet them out of Creation. Only works on *people*, for degrees of people, no idea where they go, and I can’t pull them back, but they *ain’t here.* Medusa was so hung up on both your parents, and thus was stuck in a rut. Hopefully, she’ll find a new calling. Grover, you, like your Uncle Ferdinand over there,” I pointed, “Would’ve likely been sold off. Percy, she probably would’ve tried to trade you to your dad to get in his good graces, since she still held a torch for you.”

“And… me?” the blonde girl questioned with trepidation, but I could tell she already knew the answer.

“She would’ve killed you, grinding your statue to dust, *solely based on your parentage,*” I stated. “Which is why I didn’t bother trying to help her, but… *exiled* her instead.”

The daughter of Athena frowned, “But, she’ll be back. You can’t *kill* Monsters. Not really.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged, “but I *didn’t* kill her, did I? She might reform. She might come back, but only a shadow of her former self. She *might* not come back at all. Time will tell, and I’ll handle her if we cross paths once more.”

Percy questioned, “Could you have really turned her back?”

“Ninety-five percent sure,” I replied. “Well, a *hundred*, given enough time, but ninety-five within the decade. Creating a new form for her to inhabit… should’ve been doable.”

The other three stared at me.

“Right, so, it’s been a *long* fucking day, and we should probably get some rest,” I stated, pulling out Percy’s bag and tossing it to him, walking over to the nearest wall, and manifesting the doorway to my **Pocket Apartment**. “We’re gonna need to figure out what we’re doing next, but that can wait. Take my hand and you’ll be able to head inside. I’ve turned the guest bedroom into bunks so you all can shower, get some sleep, and start tomorrow fresh without having to worry about *Monsters*.”

Percy nodded, and, accepting my hand, I directed him into the extradimensional space, Annabeth and Grover doing the same, and I followed them through, to find the Satyr hyperventilating, the two Demigods looking at him nervously.

“*There’s, there’s no* ***Nature*** *here!*” the nature spirit whisper-shouted, on the edge of panicking.

“Yeah, I’m still trying to figure out how to make that,” I nodded. “Relax, it’s all out there,” I tried to reassure him, but that didn’t help. “Actually …” Mentally interfacing with the setup, I spent ten points, having them to spare now, doubling the size of my pocket dimension, added a hanging ivy displays to their now larger room, and mine, a fern to the bathroom, and then just going full bore and adding a little garden area with the extra square-footage, having to lock down the rooms to change them.

Interestingly, the Satyr flinched, but then relaxed a little. “Better?” I questioned.

The glass door that appeared on the far wall unfrosted itself, and slid open on its own, revealing a small area of greenery, which, on shaky hooves, Grover approached, took a deep breath at the threshold of, and answered, “Uh. Yeah. Yeah it is. Uh… how?”

“This is my *own* little pocket of Creation. I can mess with it a little,” I shrugged. “Though this size is about all I can handle at the moment. If you want, you can drag a cot and sleep in there. Not sure how Satyrs do things. You two, bedroom is that way, second door on the right’s yours, door on the left’s mine, first door on the right is the bathroom, feel free to use anything you find in your room, it’s easy enough to restock.”

*“Thanks, Gene!”* Percy replied, yawning deeply, and toddling off to bed, while Annabeth just stared at me, before turning to follow.

Leaving them, I headed back out, checking my totals.

Thirty points for capturing the Tier ***6*** threat, who should’ve been my equal, but, like I told the others, hyper-specialization was a *serious* crutch. Had I fought *Rider*-Medusa, I would’ve died in *seconds*, let alone if she whipped out *motherfucking* ***Bellerophon***, but that’s why I stayed the *fuck* out of the Nasuverse, as did *anyone that was sane.*

Another ten was received for selling her, because *fuck dealing with that headache.*

One point two points taken off for the debt, and another ten for the **Pocket Apartment** upgrade left me with twenty-eight point eight.

Unfortunately, **Polymorph Defense** cost *Fifty.*

But, this was definitely a ‘spend money to make money’ scenario, as I picked up an additional Shroud, bringing my total up to *four*, the one on Thalia still at work, but, with *none* of the conditions met, that meant it would take an hour to capture her at full-body coverage, given her strength, *divided by the percent of her form in contact with the Shroud*, which, considering she was a *tree*, meant that the Binding, coverage lower than a tenth of a percent, would take *months* to kick in.

But I had time.

So, taking *this* one, I slowly walked around the place, picking up statues, one at a time, to make hidden Shroud pads for them to ‘stand’ upon, needing to lay a few of them down to maintain skin contact, as I wasn’t *entirely* sure if their shoes would be enough to stop the Capture, even if, metaphysically, their gear was ‘them’ enough to get turned to stone.

Making it one, long, interconnected piece, I only used up one Shroud, and, this way, once I got Polymorph *Immunity*, and turned them all back, if any hadn’t been Captured yet, then the ones that got turned back could get up and walk away without disturbing the Binding process of those still bearing stony visages.

*Not sure about some of them here, but this is literally the only way most are going to survive, so fuck it, just don’t sell them, and toggle off biological immortality*, I thought, not *super* happy with Capturing innocents, but, well, I wasn’t sure *what* flavor of stasis petrification was used in this universe, but as I could *feel* the connections start to form, *they weren’t dead*, and this was *far* preferable.

Stretching, and making a note to pick up **Fairie Feast** when I had the free points, as *damn* were those burgers good, I headed back home, only to find Annabeth sitting at the kitchenette table, playing with her knife, and wearing *adorable* owl-themed pajamas, which didn’t fit the ‘I’ve been waiting for you to return’ things, but I wasn’t going to tell *her* that.

“This is… like *Mount Olympus*,” she declared. “The others, they haven’t been to it, but I have.”

“This is *much smaller* than Mount Olympus,” I countered. “But, yeah, same basic concepts.”

The daughter of Athena stared at me, and my **Defenses** blocked *something*, though I was pretty sure she wasn’t doing it on purpose, so didn’t comment on it. “I. What *are* you.”

“[I told you](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItLaESz43N0&ab_channel=SupergiantGames), Annabeth Chase, I’m the child of a *Protogenoi*. And, yes, I could probably handle this entire debacle myself, but, *let’s be honest*, not only is that not what *you* want, with Percy being who he is, both he, *and you,* need the practice,” I informed her, not unkindly. “You likely could have handled that fight, Medusa would hesitate to strike a lethal blow on her paramour’s child, but it *won’t* be the only one you have, and consider *this* a lesson in pushing past the mental effects of Mist. If you wish to survive to adulthood, trust me, *you’ll need it.*”

I smiled, realizing I was still in armor, and pulled it back. “While the Furies were handled decently enough, they were *somewhat* overkill, which is why I stepped in as fast as I did, but when it came to Medusa, you *fucked up*, ***Demigod***, make no mistake about it. Then again, so did Percy, who’s inexperienced, but so did Grover, who *isn’t*. That said, you’re all still *alive*, and can try again tomorrow, uninjured, and well rested. We *both* know that wasn’t guaranteed.”

“But, why? Why do this?” the daughter of Wisdom demanded. “The way you act, it’s, it’s like the *gods*. Butgods don’t *do* this.”

Ignoring the likely unintentional insult, I shrugged, smirking, “I didn’t lie to Medusa, Daughter of Athena. I’m here because it’s the *right thing to do*. And as for the Gods?”

My expression widened into a self-satisfied grin.

“**You’ll find I have *little* in common with my cousins.**”

Music –

Medusa - From Olympus – Hades OST [Extended}

I told you – Hades – On the Coast