Python's Cave
by RobinSchade

Summary

*This fic was recently added from ff.net* Two weeks after the events of BoO, Nico di Angelo and Will Solace discover that Apollo has been kidnapped by an ancient enemy of his. In the sun God's absence winter has arrived early and old threats are stirring in the darkness. While dealing with his ever-growing feelings for a certain son of Hades, Will Solace must lead a quest to save his father before the Pythian Games take place at Delphi and a third war occurs, one which threatens Elysium itself. Before ToA. Solangelo!

Notes

Hello! Python's Cave is my fanfic that takes place about two weeks after the end of BoO (contains BoO spoilers!). It will go back and forth between the POV's of Will, Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil as they embark on a quest to save Apollo. First and foremost, this is mainly a whole lot of Solangelo.

Thank you for reading, and please leave a review!

*I do not own anything PJO or HoO! All that awesomeness belongs to the amazing Rick Riordan.*
Hey everyone! This is one of the first fanfics I ever wrote and I finally decided to post it to AO3 even though it already existed on fanfic.net for a while. Thanks for reading! :)

Prologue

For one week after the War, everything at Camp Half-Blood was golden. The Stoll brothers stole things, the Athena kids debated the semantics of medieval historical documents, and the Aphrodite kids sat around reapplying their lip-gloss and insulting everyone else. Percy pelted his enemies with water balloons, and Jason begged Annabeth for help with building the thousands of shrines he'd promised Kymopoleia.

As it was soon discovered, he hadn't the foggiest how to design a single one of them.

It was the Utopian quintessence of Camp Half-Blood. The sun shone, the fighting was kept to minor mutilations, and the two camps didn't want to massacre each other. Everything was perfect. Well... perfect for anyone who wasn't a ghastly, grumpy, aloof, uncouth, curmudgeon son of Hades.

Indeed, Nico di Angelo considered it to be the most obscenely sanguine place he'd ever had the misfortune to be forced-to-stay-at-on-pain-of-death by a blue-eyed, blonde-haired, son of the Sun God who fancied himself a healer.

When Will Solace wasn't failing at archery, and bursting people's ear drums with his singing, he was guaranteed to be found in the infirmary, rather making people bleed with needles instead, and playing doctor. At least, that's how Nico imagined his profession. Of course, if he couldn't be found doing any of those things either, he was most certainly trailing after the son of Hades. Will claimed it was to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't skip town, but Nico wasn't so sure.

No one could possibly be so annoying, sheeearly by default. No matter how rude and obnoxious and pitiful Nico made himself, nothing would shake the fool. The blonde boy followed him around like a content puppy with sad eyes who enjoyed being kicked and scolded.

Then the perfection-that-was-not-perfection-to-Nico faltered. The temperatures plummeted. The sun dimmed in the sky, a pale bowl lacking warmth and energy. The Camper's felt it's change, most especially the children of Apollo. Despite the summertime, a chill bit into the air. With each passing morning, they awoke to see the grass covered in a thickening hoarfrost. The dew that blanketed the strawberry fields crystallized into callous beads, which suffocated and burned the plants on whom they glittered.

It seemed Nico alone didn't mind the frigid temperatures. Though unnatural, it was a welcome relief from the heat that scorched his dreams.

Night after night, he found himself stumbling through the parched throat that was Tartarus. His surroundings flickering and distorting, the flame of a candle on it's metaphorical death rattle. The
threat of monsters was the only thing that pushed him to continue.

'Just a little further', he thought to himself each time, 'a little further and I'll reach the end.'

It was a lie and he knew it.

No matter how many times he repeated it to himself, no amount of repetition would make it true. It was madness, utter insanity. He felt it's claws digging firmly into his back, just out of reach. With every visit it penetrated deeper and he worried about the day it would reach his heart.

It was all a lie. He could feel it.

Something was coming.

Chapter One:

Monsters Inside and Out
(And Inside-Out as Well)

Nico jolted awake in his bunk inside the Hades cabin at Camp Half Blood.

"It's okay, I'm fine, it was just a-" His mumbling faded as he realized he was alone.

He shook his head, chagrined.

Two weeks after Gaea's defeat, and he still expected to wake up in the infirmary with a blue-eyed, blonde-haired Will Solace frowning down at him in evident worry. That should be the true cause of my nightmares, he thought groggily.

A glance at his alarm clock told him it was 4 a.m..

The phantom heat from his dream parched his throat and he staggered to the sink, where he gulped down as much water as he could. He splashed his face with it, and then watched the stream trickle through his fingertips for a moment.

He had spent four and a half years of his life convinced that everyone hated him. He avoided their stares like it was them, and not he, who radiated death. He stayed on the move, never allowing himself to get comfortable. His past was lonely and discordant, but he'd always believed he was doing others a favor. He'd learned to survive on his own somehow, fighting monsters solo, facing the nightmares armed with nothing but his wits.

And unfortunately, nightmares were a fact of life for Nico di Angelo.

Abruptly, he shut the water back off.

He knew better than to try to fall back asleep, and instead tugged on his tattered sneakers and slipped out the front door.

His breath hitched as a gust of icy wind struck him. It made the hair on his arms stand on end and he struggled to inhale for a moment. It bit into his skin, despite his t-shirt and sweatpants, and he pulled his hoodie tightly around himself. In habit, his fingers closed on the small Mythomagic figurine he always carried in his pocket.

For a moment he stood on the front steps of the Hades cabin, taking in the night. The crisp smell of pine trees filled his nose, and the wind howled softly in his ears.
The cabins were oppressive and claustrophobic. He needed to escape.

He ran to the lake, only stopping when the stitch in his side became unbearable. His lungs and eyes burned and he wondered how he'd managed to get so out of shape. He wondered if the whole war-Tartarus, imprisonment, Gaea, all of it- had finally caught up to him.

Then he slid down against the rough trunk of an oak tree and cried.

When he'd fled from his cabin he hadn't known where he was hoping to get to, or what he was hoping to find when he got there. Perhaps somewhere just a little less scary, a little more familiar. Or maybe just somewhere isolated where no one would see him break down. But now that he was here, he knew this wasn't it. It was only somewhere to be just as scared and much more alone.

Eventually it ended, leaving him feeling drained and hollow. He stared blankly out at the lake watching small sheets of ice melt on the black surface. A glimmer of light caught his attention, and he peered back down the trail.

Someone was walking in his direction, strides long and slinking like a cat. The moonlight shown down fiercely enough for him to make out the glint of sun-kissed blonde hair. Like a sixth sense, Nico knew instantly who it was.

Will Solace.

Nico hesitated. No doubt if he didn't evade him, the son of Apollo would pester and bother him until sunrise. He considered briefly crouching behind the tree, but it seemed a little juvenile. Or better yet, he could shadow travel out of camp all-together. Something stayed him where he was though. It might have been the thrum of butterflies racing against his heartbeat which always bloomed around the blonde boy, or just the intrigue of why a son of Apollo was out in the cold all alone, but it hardly mattered. Perhaps it was simply because a part of him enjoyed his company.

"Will?" Nico murmured.

Nico heard a sharp intake of breath as Will started at the sound of his voice. He'd spoken softly, but as a son of Hades, it seemed he had a special gift for scaring the crap out of people. At least, he tried to view it as a gift.

"Nico?" Will whispered back, peering towards him in the darkness.

"Yeah, it's me." Nico murmured. He saw the silhouette of Will's shoulders relax. The movement puzzled Nico. Who else did he think it was?

"What are you doing out here?" Will asked quietly. His breath misted in a white cloud as he spoke. "It's freezing."

Nico scowled. "I could ask you the same thing Solace."

"I was just coming back from the infirmary." Will said easily, walking up to him. "I had the night shift with Kayla and I saw you over here."

When he moved closer Nico finally saw his face.

He had deep shadows under his eyes, darkening like bruises. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his golden hair was unkempt and disheveled. His skin seemed pale, as if he was coming down with something. He looked exhausted and Nico wondered when it last was that he'd had a proper night's sleep. He doubted it was since before the battle. Nico had seen the infirmary afterwards, full to
bursting point with injured demigods. Will was the best healer in camp. Nico would never be caught dead admitting it, but he had watched in awe as Will managed to save what must have been the lives of at least thirty demigods, from both the Greeks and the Romans. Nico wasn't one to be caught playing mother hen, but he suddenly had the unbidden desire to order the poor guy to bed immediately.

"Your turn," Will murmured. "Why are you sitting out here in the cold?"

Nico hesitated.

"I was going for a walk," he muttered shortly. He saw Will's expression brighten hopefully and added, "Alone."

"I love going for walks alone." Will said with a small smile. "I'll join you."

Nico held back a groan as Will plopped down next to him and leaned back against the tree. For a second his hand brushed against Nico's. The feeling was warm and pleasant, and made his arm tingle. It was also foreign and unexpected and he scooted away from him spitefully.

"What part of 'alone' don't you understand Solace?" He moaned, kicking grumpily at the frosted grass.

"I'll be quiet." Will promised. "You won't even know I'm here."

"Solace!" Nico turned and glared at him.

Will held up his hands. "Hey, if you don't want me here, don't beat around the bush." He said. He looked at Nico in amused expectance, like he didn't believe the son of Hades would actually send him away.

"Okay." Nico scowled. "I don't want you here Solace."

Will scrunched his nose at him. "You could've beaten around the bush a little," he muttered. He drew his eyebrows together in a pout. "Please? I really don't want to go back to my cabin right now."

"No. Go away."

Nico shifted anxiously, the frozen grass crackling under him. Will didn't leave but he was no longer talking either. Nico looked at him in surprise, to see him staring desolately at the frosted ground.

Nico was stunned. In the two weeks he'd known the son of Apollo, he had never seen him simply turn down the chance to argue with Nico. He seemed like a different person altogether, rather than the bright-eyed, exuberant guy Nico had grown accustomed to over the past two weeks. He was only wearing a flimsy t-shirt. He had to be freezing, and yet he didn't shiver or even try to shield himself from the cold.

"Will?" Nico asked softly, worried in spite of himself.

Will jerked and looked up sharply, like his mind had been wrenched forcefully from dark side of a distant planet. He stared blankly at Nico, without any expectation or assumption. Nico looked back at him, wondering what could possibly be on his mind.

"What's wrong?" He whispered.
Will hesitated for a moment, looking unsure. The butterflies which had fluttered in Nico's stomach, seemed to have twisted into a sinuous serpent which wrapped it's body around his heart and squeezed. The frighteningly vacant look vanished from Will's face to be replaced by a shallow smile. It was forced, but it was a smile.

"Just tired." He mumbled. He didn't elaborate and Nico wasn't inclined to push him.

He frowned at Will's t-shirt. "Aren't you cold Solace?"

Will looked down at his bare arms and shrugged. "I don't feel the cold easily." The air around Will's skin seemed to mist very slightly in the cold, like he was enveloped in a permanent aura of warmth.

They sat in silence for a while.

The perimeter of the forest loomed mysteriously before them. The pines swayed in the wind, creaking and knocking. Some of the needles were frozen solid, and when Nico reached a hand out to touch them, they shattered like fragile glass. He wondered how the nymphs were holding up. The Athena and Aphrodite cabins had taken time to weave blankets for them, though it really wasn't necessary. Nico thought he saw a few of them draped in the uppermost branches.

Expectably, Will broke the silence.

"Did you have a nightmare again?"

"Pretty sure I'm having one right now," Nico muttered uncomfortably. "What makes you think I had a nightmare?"

"You look upset." Will murmured softly. He absentmindedly held his hand out over a shard of ice littering the ground. Within seconds it was reduced to a puddle of water.

Nico glanced at him. It was nearly pitch black in the forest and Will's face was hidden in the shadows. Nico could see him just fine of course, but he was a son of Hades. The dark was his specialty.

He could easily see Will's soft blue eyes, large and warm, the gentle slope of his nose, and the curve of his mouth… Nico cringed internally and planted a road block in front of the thought before it flew out of control.

"Like you could tell in the dark!" Nico exclaimed.

Will shrugged. "Actually I can see pretty well in the dark. Special skill of Apollo's and whatnot…" He looked at Nico suddenly and smirked. "I can see you looking at me."

Despite the cool air Nico suddenly felt incredibly hot. He looked away immediately and Will laughed softly.

Another silence fell between them.

Gradually Nico realized that Will was still watching him. He glared at the son of Apollo, which seemed to amuse him. For a few seconds they stared at each other in a silent challenge. Unfortunately, as Nico's discomfort grew, so did Will's grin.

"Why aren't you afraid of me?" He asked him point-blank.
Will's grin flickered for a second as surprise crossed his face. Nico thought he almost looked confused by the question. "I guess it's like I said before," he murmured eventually, "I don't feel coldness easily."

Nico stared at him slight bafflement. He had never met anyone quite like Will Solace. Before he met him, Nico would have assumed a child of Apollo would be the last person to want to associate with a child of Hades. After all, they were nearly polar opposites.

Nico finally tore his gaze from Will's face, instead letting it fell to his clothes.

He was wearing a white t-shirt with the grinning Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland, and fluorescent orange pajama pants. Nico thought the cat's expression bore a disturbing resemblance to Will's usual expression in the morning. He was also wearing neon pink crocs adorned with various pins and clips, which Nico was certain belonged to one of his sisters.

Nico smirked at his attire.

"I'm sorry you were dropped on your head so many times as a baby, Solace."

Will stared at him blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Your shoes are ridiculous."

Will gaped at him. He looked back and forth from Nico to his pink crocs several times.

"My shoes? Yours have holes in them." Will complained, pointing at Nico's foot where his toe was poking out through the worn soles. Nico wiggled it at him.

"So do yours." He exclaimed.

"Yeah, but mine are intentional."

"That's way worse." Nico cried.

"You know what, leave my shoes out of this Death Boy!"

Nico rolled his eyes at him, pushing himself up from the ground. "C'mon, let's head back."

The wind picked up under the canopy of the trees and sent ripples dancing on the dark surface of the lake, knocking the sheets of ice together. Nico pulled his jacket around himself, but Will didn't seem affected. Heat seemed to radiate from him, like he had a permanent fever. Even with the inches between them, his warmth burned into Nico's arm. He was a permanent space heater.

Will folded his hands on his lap, lacing his fingers. They were musician's hands, long with his knuckles protruded a little more than most peoples. His nails were trimmed short, with tough callouses appearing on the tips. Nico supposed it was the price he played for playing so many musical instruments.

"How come you didn't want to go back to your cabin tonight?" Nico asked him.

Will's expression darkened and he watched his feet for a moment as they walked.

Over the past two weeks, Nico had begun to think of Will as an open book. He always knew if he was happy or sad, or angry or scared. Will never tried to conceal his feelings like so many other people did. Like I do, Nico thought. To him the son of Apollo was next to fascinating, a source of intrigue. He was the most honest and sincere person Nico had ever met.
"I can't help but feel like something's wrong," Will muttered. He looked wearily at the son of Hades. "Do you feel it?"

Nico shook his head. "Feel what?"

"There's something different about this summer. It's not... warm. I love summer but I feel..." Will drifted off, reaching out to touch an icicle on one of the lower branches. In a matter of seconds it had melted. "The sun shines, but it's cold. And my brothers and sisters are having horrible dreams. Last night Austin woke up and just started flipping out, yelling something was in our cabin."

Nico looked at him quickly, startled. "What sort of thing?" he asked.

Will shrugged hopelessly. "Know idea. He wasn't making any sense. Honestly I got the impression it was the aftereffect of a nightmare or something, but now everyone else is on edge. Our powers of prophecy have been gone for a couple weeks now, but we didn't think it would be this bad. The infirmary feels more welcoming than our cabin. It's like it doesn't even belong to us anymore." Will rubbed his eyes wearily. "On top of that, Kayla's had a nasty cold the past few days. It's not bad, but it shouldn't have happened at all. Kids of Apollo don't get sick. I don't understand it."

Nico met his eyes briefly and asked, "It's that bad?"

Will took a deep breath and let it out shakily. "It's just this feeling. Like something's wrong and I can't place it," he said. "It feels like there's a ghost following us around, breathing down our necks."

Nico glanced at him suspiciously, wondering if Will was making a jibe at him. If he was, he gave no indication of it.

He felt a rush of sympathy for Will, noticing the circles under his eyes. "Do you need help?" he asked tentatively. "I know I'm not much use for healing or comfort or anything like that, but I could probably do something useful."

Will peered at him and smiled slightly. "You're offering to help in the infirmary? I thought you hated it there?"

"I don't hate it," Nico muttered uncomfortably. "I am a son of Hades, you know. It's just not really my thing."

"I don't know about that," Will said as they stepped over them. "I thought it was kind of nice having you around for those first three days."

"I'm glad it was everything you dreamed it would be," Nico muttered.

Will laughed softly and looked at him in curiosity. "So what prompted this change of heart?" he asked. "You didn't seem to want to come back before. Why now?"

Nico glanced at Will, eyes catching on his eyelashes, and the tufts of pale gold hair that glowed in the moonlight, curling over his forehead and around his ears.

"I've got nothing better to do," he mumbled.

Will's blue eyes glinted as he grinned. "We'll see Death Boy. If the situation with my cabin gets any worse, then I just might come call on your tender mercies."
"Maybe you should tell Chiron about this, if you're that worried."

Will nodded. "I think I will, after breakfast tomorrow. It's probably nothing, but I don't want to take the risk," he winced and added softly, "I just wish the dreams weren't so horrible."

Nico looked sharply at him. "Wait, it's not just Travis who's having bad dreams? You are too?"

Will shrugged. "Sometimes. Ever since the power of Delphi vanished, I've felt off. We all have. I think that's what's causing it."

"Why didn't you say something sooner?" Nico asked concernedly. "I might've helped."

Will peered curiously at him from under a curl of blonde. "How?"

"I'm pretty good when it comes to dreams." Nico admitted. "At least, when it comes to deciphering or controlling them. If you prefer to forget them entirely though, Clovis would be of greater use."

"I didn't know you could do that." Will peered at Nico with a peculiar expression on his face. The intensity of his gaze made Nico uncomfortable.

"What?"

"Nothing." Will shook his head. "You're just surprising. What was your nightmare about this time?" Will asked softly, watching him out of the corner of his eye.

Nico had to fight to keep his voice relaxed. "Again, Solace, what makes you think I had a nightmare?"

"You were standing outside your cabin in the freezing cold." Will said unceremoniously. "I mean, I know you're kind of a weirdo di Angelo, but I've never seen you out of bed before noon." Will smiled at him to soften the words.

Over the past two weeks, Nico felt he had begun to know Will better. He could always tell if Will was happy or sad, or angry or scared. And Will never tried to hide his emotions or his feelings like so many other people did. Like I do, Nico thought. To him, the son of Apollo was next to fascinating, a source of intrigue. He was the most honest and sincere person Nico had ever met.

"Did Jason ever find out what happened to Apollo after the battle?" Will interrupted his thoughts

"No, I don't think so," Nico said. "He tried to convince Zeus to let him off easy though." He wished fervently there was some bit of good news he could offer Will.

They were moving slowly through the trees. A branch cracked loudly underfoot and Nico kicked it aside with his shoe.

"Nico… why were you really out here all alone? Is it bad dreams or… were you planning on leaving?" Will asked quietly.

The question came out surprisingly stiff, but when Nico looked at Will the son of Apollo's expression was perfectly blank.

Nico twirled the ring on his finger. In truth, he didn't know how to answer Will. Was he leaving? That's certainly how it had felt. He had thought he'd been running towards something, but at Will's query he wondered if he had, in fact, been fleeing away from the very same thing.

"You can't just keep running," murmured Will, almost as if he had read Nico's thoughts.
"I'm not running," Nico snapped, but he found himself unable to look towards Will when he said it.

"You've never stayed at camp before," Will said softly. "Out of all the times you've been here. No offence, but I get the feeling you're biding your time, waiting for everyone to turn their backs so you can slip away unnoticed."

"Unnoticed?" Nico exclaimed. "With the way you lumber around after me all the time? You've got nothing to worry about- it's impossible for me to go anywhere unnoticed."

"Oh- good." The corner of Will's mouth twitched up. A moment later it crept back down and his brow furrowed. "How come you never stayed before?"

"I didn't stay before," Nico muttered grumpily, "because your incessant yammering is exactly that. Incessant."

"That's not true!" Will exclaimed. "I've never even spoken to you before two weeks ago."

"I know," Nico smirked at him. "It's a shame how things have changed, isn't it?"

Will glared at him with all the ferocity of an enraged puppy. "You know you're not very nice," he grumbled.

"Who ever said I was nice?" Nico asked, raising an eyebrow, then added under his breath, "'Cause I'll make them sorry."

Will rolled his eyes. "Oh come on di Angelo," he sighed. "You're deflecting. Why do you us? You'd think we chased you away with torches and pitch forks."

"Sort of seems like I was," Nico said without thinking.

"Will looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter now Will," Nico said haltingly. Will looked at him in frustrated disbelief. Strangely, Nico found the expression almost endearing on the son of Apollo.

"I want to know," Will pleaded.

"Well you don't always get you want Solace!" Nico snapped. It came out much harsher than he'd intended and Will flinched. Nico let out a breath and looked around him uncomfortably. "It's not that I hate people, Will, I just-" He took a deep breath, trying to figure out how to explain. "I'm the son of Hades."

"So?" Will pressed.

"So, no one likes that. It makes people uncomfortable. I make people uncomfortable," Nico muttered. "No one wants to be around someone who can summon corpses and skeletons out of the earth, who spends most of his time in the Underworld, and who is better friends with the dead than the living. People don't like me, and I'm certainly not going to chase them around and force them to accept my company. It's like you said already, I'm not very nice, and I have neither the ability nor the desire to pretend otherwise. I come here when I need a break from… well, the rest of my life."

By the end his little tirade Nico's eyes stung. He blinked hard already regretting letting Will goad him into this discussion. Why couldn't he ever keep his mouth shut?

Will didn't say anything for a minute. They had stopped walking. Nico knew Will was still watching him. More than anything he wished Will would say something, anything.
"I like having you here," Will said softly.

Nico had no answer to that. It was something that had never been said to him before. When he looked over, Will’s calm eyes met his own. For the first time, Nico found himself noticing that their clear blue was speckled with tiny flecks of molten gold, like the sun itself was fighting to shine through from somewhere beyond. They stood out in the dark.

"Um, thanks, I guess," he muttered, unsure what else to say.

Will nodded. "Just make sure you stay this time."

"I want to right now," Nico began haltingly. "It's just... I have a bad track record. I'm not sure I know how to stay in one place."

"You can start by coming back with me," Will told him, surprisingly intense. "Right now."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It's not supposed to be hard," Will insisted. "You just like overthinking things."

Nico hesitated. For years he'd done the same things, over and over again. He would go to a place, either New Rome or Camp Half-blood, and then leave from it. Not once had either of them ever made him happy, and more than anything he wanted to try for that again.

"That's how most things in life work, you know," Will continued. "Things usually have to get worse before they can get better."

Nico sighed. "Fine. I'll come back with you."

"Good," said Will. Then bluntly he added, "So was your nightmare about Tartarus?"

Nico ignored him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Will prompted.

"Do I look like I want to talk about it?" Nico snapped.

"Suppressing every horrible thing that happened to you will only make it worse," said Will. "It's another problem you've got."

"What, are you my shrink now?"

Will sighed. "Okay fine. I won't make you talk about it."

"Smart move Blondie."

"You're still calling me that?" Will asked with a small smile.

"Of course I'm still calling you that. You're still blonde aren't you?" Nico had taken up the nickname during his three days in the infirmary. "If you insist on calling me 'Death Boy', then don't expect me to call you by your name. Besides, 'Blondie' is a way nicer name than 'Death Boy'."

"That's not true!" Will cried. "I'm way more-" Will gave a small gasp, and froze.

"What is it?" Nico asked, startled. Will turned his head, squinting into the dark frozen foliage around them. Nico followed his gaze. A few ferns and shrubs rustled in the wind, but other than
that the only signs of life were themselves. He didn't answer and Nico grew worried.

"Will?" Nico reached out a hand to touch his arm. His skin was burning hot. "What's wrong?"

Will jumped slightly, and finally turned back to Nico. His eyes were wide and frightened, but he shook his head. "I thought I saw something. We shouldn't be out here," he stammered. "We need to get back."

"Why? What is it?" Nico demanded.

"They keep the forest stalked with monsters. C'mon, let's just go. We're almost out anyways."

Nico sighed. "That's the last time I take you for a walk, Solace," he muttered, hurrying after Will. He'd nearly caught up with him when a soft crack made him pause.

He turned to look back into the forest, but couldn't see anything amidst the trees. He frowned. Whatever he had heard, it had sounded close.

"What is it?" Will asked.

"I thought I heard..." Nico shook his head. "Nevermind."

He took a few more steps forward, and then on a whim, he decided to look up.

Nico had a fraction of a second to catch the glow of luminous eyes looking down, however they weren't focused on him. Without a second thought he shoved Will sideways with all his strength. He wasn't a moment early, and before he could reach for his sword something heavy slammed into his back.

He landed on his stomach, his breath punched from his lungs with a sharp whoosh. A ripping pain sunk into his side, a low snarl rumbled in his ear. Unable to draw his sword, Nico lashed out wildly with his fist. It connected with thick, barbed skin. Off to the side he heard Will shouting.

His voice was enough to briefly distract the creature, allowing Nico to twist onto his back, bringing his feet up and kick, sending the thing sprawling. It turned on him again, almost instantly, but he had time to recognize it as a hydra.

It's hindquarters tensed, and he rolled sideways on the cold ground, rocks scraping his hands as he desperately tried to avoid it. He rocked to his feet, drawing his sword.

He swung at the monster, but his blade deflected off of it's scales. Stumbling backwards, heart pounding in his chest, his foot caught on something and he felt himself fall backwards... then his vision was filled with stars and a splitting pain in his skull.

The hydra dove after him.

The only thing keeping it from sinking it's teeth into Nico's throat was his arm thrown across the creature's chest. Despite it being relatively small for it's size, Nico was nowhere near strong enough to throw it off. He caught a flash of the pink insides of its foaming mouth. He tasted blood in his own mouth- but then the weight lifted.

He lay there shaking and panting in the dirt, trying to gasp in air as the pain in his side intensified. The hydra was gone and Will was- Will!

Nico sprung up and realized what had happened. In his desperation, Will had tackled the beast. But
Will was not a fighter, at least not in the combative sense of the word, and he was now pinned under it as Nico had been seconds before.

Regaining his senses, it took only a second for Nico to lunge at the beast, swinging his sword at it's body.

The hydra exploded into gold dust, which rained down around the son of Apollo. He spluttered and coughed, wiping it from his face. He looked shaken, but otherwise unharmed.

"Are you okay?" Nico panted, clutching his side. The puncture marks from the hydra's claws burned like fire, his head swimming sickeningly. He reached out a hand to Will, trying to help him up. Will gripped it, but when Nico went to pull him up he found himself in the dirt next to Will.

"Nico!?" Will shouted. Nico felt hands on top of his own, clutching at his side. "Nico, you're bleeding."

Nico saw him reach to draw his hands away from his side, but Nico snarled and shoved him away.

"Don't touch me! It's fine, I'm fine," he repeated automatically. "It's just a scratch, it's-" Another splash of pain lanced through him and he yelped before he could stop himself.

"It's not fine. Let me see." Will's voice spiked sickeningly through his skull. It made him want to cover his ears. Nico tried it and it didn't help. Nothing made sense. Why was he even in the forest at all? He couldn't remember, he needed to go back, he needed to escape before Gaia caught him…

"It's poisoned. You need to stay still." He barely registered Will's voice over the pounding rush of blood in his ears. He grit his teeth against another shot of pain, but it abated quickly.

He looked down to see Will's hand on his side. He couldn't remember ever releasing his own.

The son of Apollo was saying something, his mouth was moving urgently, but Nico couldn't understand. Mostly, he saw blue eyes, large and concerned. Why was he concerned? He could no longer remember...

He was staring up at the canopies of leaves. He felt weightless, warmth flooded through him, warming him to his core. The sensation reminded him of being in the infirmary...

He watched his breath mist in front of his face in fascination. Beyond the branches, the dark navy blue of the sky merged with the first orange streaks of sunrise. It was beautiful and surreal, and seemed to fill his vision.

Everything shattered into the night.
Two weeks ago, Will Solace stumbled upon Nico di Angelo on the crest of Half-Blood Hill. He knew some of the preconceived notions others had towards the son of Hades; he was dangerous, he was distant, he was damaged… Altogether he was soon discovered to be a paradox which Will found entralling, from the moment he said his name to the next, when Nico's sword was at his throat and he was glaring at Will with dark onyx eyes.

When Will had first looked into them, he was reminded of galaxies. Dark, deep, and glittering with secrets. In that instant Will judged him to be as cold and arcane as the dark side of the moon and as volatile as a supernova. A flight-risk, he knew, and yet he burned with desire to know him. Will was a healer; it was in his nature to want to understand people.

He had been quite pleased with himself when he'd managed to convince Nico di Angelo to spend a full three days recovering in the infirmary. Had he been surprised when he agreed to Will's terms so quickly? Sure. Had he expected him to be a thoroughly uncooperative and ungrateful patient? Well, given his personality, it was a reasonable hypothesis. Had he thought he would be so pointedly obnoxious that Will worried it was doing more damage to keep him there than to just let him stay at the Hades cabin instead? No, he hadn't really expected that.

Will decided the safest route would be to begin with a basic checkup.

After an hour of refusing to open his mouth for a thermometer (the son of Hades called it "a modern-day hoodoo trinket designed to befuddle and deceive it's holder into thinking they were a real doctor", or something similar which Will didn't quite understand), smacking the stethoscope away (it wouldn't matter because Nico "didn't have a heart anyways"), and merely flipping Will off when he asked for his arm to place a blood-pressure cuff on him, Will's patience was wearing thin.

Then Will discovered the damn werewolf scratches.

"Holy Gods, what happened?" Will had gasped, leaning forwards to scrutinize Nico's scrawny, pale arm.

"Lycaon." Nico shrugged uncaringly.

"Nico, this is really infected. We need to get these stitches out now!"

Nico raised a wry eyebrow and pondered his arm. "Really? I think it's looking pretty good." They both watched as a greenish blob of bloody puss oozed out of the festering wound. Nico gagged and covered his mouth.

"Why didn't you say something?!" Will cried as he began cutting the messily-sewn stitches out with suture scissors. Some of them didn't need to be cut; they were so grimy and gelatinous they fell out on their own. "They're putrefying!" Will nearly screamed. "Seriously, what's wrong with you? You should have done something sooner!"
"Like what?" Nico snapped acrimoniously. "I haven't had any time. What should I have done?"

"Literally anything." Will glared at him as ferociously as he was capable and Nico sniggered.

"Fine. Next time I'll chop it off."

"Anything except that."

"If you must know, Blondie, I was curious to see if I would turn into a werewolf. I've always thought it would be fun..."

Will groaned. "That's from a bite, not scratches Death Boy! Hold still. I need to disinfect it and make sure nothing has gotten into it." Will reached down into his bag and emerged with a hypodermic needle and a small vial of clear liquid. "I'll numb it first..."

"That's really not necessary." Nico said tersely. He watched in growing skittishness as Will dabbed an astringent-laced cotton ball on his arm.

"High tolerance for pain?" Will asked.

"No. I actually haven't been able to feel anything at all with that arm for about three days now."

Will's only response was to breathe heavily out his nose and pray for self-control. When he finished cleaning the small patch of skin and began filling the needle with lidocaine however, Nico ripped his arm away.

"Oh no, you are not going to skewer me with that thing," he snapped, feverishly trying to shift away from the son of Apollo. Will stared at him in disbelief.

"It's not possible to skewer you with this," he informed him. "Don't tell me you're afraid of needles?"

Nico cringed and Will sighed. "You're willing to run into battle and risk getting impaled on a sword, but you won't accept a shot?"

"You're damn right I don't want a shot! Just leave it. It's fine!" Nico yelped. He forced his voice into a calm, collected demeanor. "You know, I've been thinking Solace, and I actually really like my arm this way..." With that, he leapt up and tried to run for his life, but Will grabbed him.

"Unless you want your arm to fall off, I need to take care of it," Will said firmly.

Nico hesitated, a look somewhere between terror and curiosity frozen on his face. "If it falls off, can I get a hook instead?" he asked hopefully.

Will stared at him, trying to decide if he was joking or not. "Sure. But it's your entire arm that's infected. You'll have a hook coming out of your shoulder."

"Dang it."

A knock on the door made Will turn, and Austin poked his head in. "Hey Will, do you know where Kayla put the-...

"Help me!" Nico yelled wretchedly at him. "Your brother's trying to kill me."

"Will wouldn't do that." Austin said slowly. He looked towards Will. "What's going on?"
"What's going on," Nico moaned miserably before Will could answer, "is doctor Jekyll has turned into mister Hyde."

Austin stared at him.

Will turned back to Nico in time to catch him in the act of smirking to himself, clearly pleased. No doubt the son of Hades considered this payback for Will following him around, setting reasonable safety guidelines during the battle.

"If you hate it here that much, maybe it would be better for you to rest in your cabin," Austin said kindly.

Nico blinked at him. "Really?"

"No!" Will shouted, turning back to his brother. "Austin, you don't understand; he's really stupid when it comes to his own health- no offense, Death Boy."

Nico scowled. "It sounded like a compliment." He took a deep breath and glared at Will. "I'm not staying here, with you and your torturous procedures-"

"You have to," Will exclaimed. "You promised. 'Styx and everything' remember?"

"Yeah…" Nico sighed sadly, shaking his head. "I didn't think that through…"

"Look, we can settle this without the needles," Will said placating. "Please stay?"

Nico crossed his arms with an indignant huff. He looked at Will consideringly, watching him with his inscrutable eyes. Finally he nodded silently glumly and allowed Will to look at his arm.

Needless to say, after lots of swearing, slapping, threats, and even one ornery bite, Will managed to clean up it up without Nico di Angelo ending up with a hook-arm or turning into a werewolf.

Now

Will burst into the infirmary with an unconscious son of Hades in his arms, expecting to find it quiet and empty. Instead he interrupted three of his siblings, Austin, Marisol, and Denise, who seemed to be in the middle of an intense conversation. The three of them froze, staring at their brother in shock.

"Will, what happened?" Denise gasped, standing up from the mulberry armchair she was sitting on. "You're covered in blood! Were you attacked?"

"It's not mine," Will gasped as Austin ran to help him.

Together, they got Nico situated on one of the beds. It wasn't difficult; the son of Hades was incredibly light, like his body was woven from the very shadows he so loved to disappear into. He groaned faintly and pulled away from them. Will grabbed his arm to keep him from falling over the side.

His heart jumped into his throat as he was able to take in the sight of his skull t-shirt, saturated and plastered down with blood. The color contrasted startling against Nico's fair skin. Will wasn't one to be easily nauseated by gaping wounds, but for some reason he suddenly felt sick. He didn't allow himself to dwell on it, and carefully pulled back the hem of his t-shirt.

The hydra had scratched him across the stomach. Sticky green ichor congealed in the wound,
blending with the red to make a pool of muddy brown.

"Will, here." Austin reappeared with Will's medical bag. He snatched it from his brother and began pulling out cloths, antiseptic, nectar, and bandages.

Nico was completely delirious as Will cleaned the scratches, but as soon as he pressed the cloth of antiseptic to them, he lurched awake with a strangled cry.

"No, don't!" Nico shouted wildly, attempting to writhe away from him. "Just leave it!"

He smacked Will away, but the motion proved to be too much for him. Will felt the rest of his strength leave him, and Nico fell back on the bed utterly drained.

"Don't!" He mumbled weakly, clutching at his side in panic. "Don't touch-"

"I won't." Will reassured him immediately. "Just let me see."

He managed to convince the son of Hades to move his hands again, so he could inspect his side. Now that it was clean, he saw that the slices were not particularly deep. The poison was weak and would take about an hour to completely leave his system.

"You don't need stitches." Will said. A look of immense relief washed across his Nico's face as he realized he wouldn't be stabbed with a needle. "The poison's not lethal. But it'll sting for an hour or so."

Nico glared at him. "You don't say?" He groaned through his teeth.

Will was relieved to hear him talking but discovered soon that Nico was still too weak to sit up. Will made him drink several ounces of nectar. Part of him wanted to give Nico more, but he decided against it; Nico already had a fever, and with his status as a son of Hades Will assumed there was already high chance of him exploding into flames like a vampire.

While Will began cleaning and bandaging the wound, Nico drifted off into a slumber. Will had just finished and was considering staying with him, perhaps reading him a bedtime story, or spoon-feeding him chicken-noodle soup, or even just holding his hand, when Austin wandered back in.

"Are you hurt?" he asked Will.

"No, I'm fine," Will assured him. Of course, if Nico hadn't pushed him out of harm's way he imagined he would be singing a different tune. Well, not singing. More like croaking. His musical skills were rather lacking.

"Good. When you get the chance I think you should go talk to Marisol," Austin said. "She's not feeling so great."

Will looked quickly at him incredulously. "She's sick too?"

Austin nodded.

Will sighed. "Okay. I'll be right there."

After Austin left, Will turned back to Nico. His conversation with Austin must have woken him again, because he was squinting up at the bright light above him. "Nico, will you be okay on your own for a minute?" Will asked him.

Nico gave him a look that suggested he thought Will was insane. "You're joking right?" he asked,
rolling his eyes. "Of course I'll be fine."

"I'll be right back." Will reassured him, reaching down to plump the pillow under his head.

"I can't wait." Nico muttered.

"It'll just take a moment."

"Oh goodie."

Will paused in the doorway. "Actually ou know what? I'm sure Marisol is fine. If you're upset, I can stay here-"

"Go away Solace," Nico grumbled and refusing to look at him.

"If your side still hurts I can numb it with a shot," Will offered innocently.

Nico glared furiously at him and growled, "You can take your needles and shove them-"

Will shut the door and went to find Marisol.

Denise was still sitting with her, grasping her hand, and speaking in a low soothing voice. They both stopped and look up as Will approached.

"Will, you should hear this," Denise said. "And then, you should be get some sleep," she added quickly after watching Will yawn.

"I will in a little bit," Will said. He turned to his other sister. "What's going on, Marisol? Austin said you were sick too?"

Marisol gave a sort of pained grimace. "Maybe just a little," she muttered through a stuffy nose. That much was obvious as soon as Will looked closer at her. She was pale and clammy and Will could feel the heat of a fever coming on when he came near her. While he doubted it was serious, it was extremely bizarre. Children of Apollo rarely got sick. Thinking back, Will didn't think he had ever been ill with anything in his life. He shook the thought from his head; given her symptoms it was probably just a minor upper respiratory infection, a cold. He'd look her over to make sure.

"Did it just come on this morning?" Will asked. He took her temperature and discovered it was at 103 F. High, but not enough to be worried about, for a daughter of Apollo. Their temperatures usually rested at a toasty 100.2 F. She shivered when Will pressed a cold stethoscope to her back.

"Thanks Will, but I really don't think this is necessary. I'm sure it'll be gone by tomorrow. I- I only came here, because I didn't want to stay in the cabin." Marisol tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear. "You know, bad dreams and all."

"You can't sleep either?"

She shook her head. "No. It really seems to be going around, huh?"

"Maybe we should speak to Clovis," Will said. "He might be able to help."

"No, I don't want to bother him," Marisol said. "I'm sure it's some sort of post-trauma thing, brought on from the war. I'll be fine. Can I stay here though, in the infirmary? There's something about our cabin… it's eerie. I don't want to go back there right now." Will watched as shuddered,
and then reached out to grab a kleenex.

"I know what you mean," he said. "Do you want me to bring you anything?"

"Nah, it's okay. Go get some rest Will, you look like you need it."

"So do you," Will told her as she blew her nose loudly.

She rolled her eyes. "Gee thanks."

"Right back at you."

Will himself had no desire return to their cabin, and instead wandered back to the adjacent ward to check on Nico again. To his surprise, the son of Hades was fast asleep, snoring softly.

Will sat next to him for a moment, listening to his breathing. His eyes traveled over his black hair, his dark eyelashes, and followed the soft slope of his nose, to the curve of his mouth. His lips were a soft pink and relaxed into a pout as he slept. He wanted to reach out and brush the lock of black hair from his forehead, the one that cascaded over his eyes. He shivered and Will pulled the blanket up over his arms, trying not to remember how it had felt having him pressed against his chest as he'd carried him back.

In a rush, Will realized how exhausted he was. More than anything he wanted to rest, but he didn't want to leave the son of Hades by himself.

There was only one solution he could see; he folded his arms on the side of his bed and layed his head on them.

For a short while the events of the night spun through his head, being attacked, nightmares, Austin and Marisol's nightmares… before long Will drifted off to sleep to the sound of Nico's steady breathing.

And in his sleep, he had a very odd dream.

Will was kneeling beside an old sofa. He squinted around, but as far as he could see everything else was cloaked in a shadowy mist. The sound of slithering crackled and buzzed in his ears, but it was muffled, almost as if he were underwater. It faded, overcome by a new sound, a thunderous rumble that quaked his eardrums. It sounded familiar.

A burst of light brought everything into sharper clarity.

He saw he was in a room. It looked like a standard hotel room; dingy floral-print beds pressed along a beige wall, an old TV and VCR sat perched on a pine dresser. The floor was a thickly matted carpet. The stench of mold and mildew filled Will's nose.

He saw that the light blossomed from a large window along the far wall. Beyond that window a huge, domed mountain loomed in the distance, sheets of white snow topping the tallest peaks.

Beyond the glass came the sound he was hearing, that thunderous roar. It was then he was able to place it; the sounds of cheering, screaming, and applause all jumbled together and multitudinous. Will had heard a similar sound before when his mother had taken him to a stadium to watch a game when he was younger.

A soft sound came from behind him. Drawing his eyes from the window, Will turned to look at the sofa. With a shock he saw that Nico di Angelo was now laying on it.
"Nico!" Will cried.

The son of Hades didn't respond. Will ran forward and knelt beside him but something was wrong; Nico's eyes were glassy when he looked at him, his breathing shallow. Will reached out to feel his forehead, brushing a wisp of black hair from his face.

At his touch, Nico shivered and looked over at Will.

"Why don't you want to save me Will?" he gasped, eyelids flickered weakly like he was fighting to stay conscious. "I've been trying to reach you for so long."

"I don't understand," Will said, his heart twisting in his chest. "Nico, what's wrong? What's happening?"

The son of Hades reached out and gripped Will's wrist tightly. "You must listen. You must help me. Listen, and you'll hear the voices."

Will had no idea what he was talking about. Voices? All he heard was the roar of the crowd from beyond this strange room.

Nico reached over to touch Will's face, his skull ring ice upon Will's skin. "You must come to me at once," Nico told him. He tried to smile at Will but it seemed contorted, not his own. He drew his hand away from Will, covering his own mouth as he coughed. "You must hurry. We don't have long. This will all be over soon."

Will placed his hand over Nico's, clasping his cold fingers. "Please, I don't understand. What do you mean?" he asked desperately, but Nico didn't seem able to answer. His coughing ceased abruptly and Will watched as Nico's expression seemed to twist, growing darker, calmer. He watched Will through glittering onyx eyes in a way that made Will suddenly feel very threatened. He seemed almost hostile.

"This is all for you Will Solace," Nico murmured. He pointed out the window, all trace of injury gone, towards the sunlight that filtered in. "See that? Get a good look while you can. This is the last time you'll see the sun. It's its dying day, you could say." Nico reached out and grabbed Will's wrist in a vice-like grip.

"Let go of me," Will said hoarsely. An inexplicable fear was coursing through his veins. He didn't know what was happening but he didn't like it. No, he hated it. Everything felt off, a whimsically grotesque shadow of what it should be. He wanted to yank his hand away but found himself unable to move, his body disobeying him.

"Why should I do that," Nico whispered. "I've bided my time for thousands of years…” Will finally met his eyes and saw the pure malice that awaited in them. "Time's up."

Will looked at him for a brief second, contemplating. "Yes, it is."

Will shifted closer to the sofa and stood up. Nico blinked at him in confusion, when Will climbed onto the sofa. His brows drew together and he tried to shove Will away, but Will knocked his arm away with a strength that wasn't his.

"Will, what are you-,"

Will clapped a hand over his mouth, silencing him. It was a good question, and Will himself had no answer to it. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't seem to control his movements and had no
way of stopping what happened next.

Swiftly he swung his other leg over the son of Hades, straddling him. Nico appeared to be too bewildered and shocked to do anything but stare at Will.

Dark eyes watched Will apprehensively over the hand on his mouth. When he was sure Nico wouldn't speak, Will withdrew his hand. He combed his fingers gently through Nico's hair and leaned down until their faces were only inches apart.

"It will all be over soon," Will repeated Nico's own words back to him. He stroked a finger down Nico's cheek, traced his bottom lip with his thumb. "Even sooner than you're expecting."

Then Will sat up and yanked the white pillow out from under Nico's head. Nico's flinch of surprise turned into a muffled cry when Will pushed it over his face, covering his nose and mouth. He thrashed violently under him, trying to throw him off.

Stop! Will screamed at himself. He didn't want to hurt Nico, he didn't want to hurt anyone.

He could feel Nico's nails digging into his wrist but Will held firm, pushing down with all of his weight-

"WILL!"

His eyes flew open.

It took Will a moment to realize where he was. His heart felt ready to burst from his chest any second, and he was shaking badly. Nico was still curled up in front of him, fast asleep. Something was wrong, but he was too groggy to understand what. Will looked at Nico. His breathing was steady and he took his pulse. Even. It was normal, everything was normal…

"Will!"

It was Marisol's voice he had heard and in a flash he was back in the other room. Denise and Austin were on either side of her, trying to soothe her.

"Guys what-"

"Will!" Marisol screamed, when she saw him enter. "Will! I can't- you have to- they want- LET GO OF ME!" she screamed when Denise grabbed her arm, trying to make her sit back down.

Will ran forward and grabbed her hands. "Hey, it's okay," he said. "What's wrong?"

"You have to go!" she sobbed. "He's g-going to kill us, if you don't-"

"Who?"

Marisol dissolved into broken sobs. Her hair was a disheveled mess of auburn, and her eyes were red-rimmed from sleep-deprivation and tears.

"You have to g-go to him!" she gasped out. "He said he'll prove it tomorrow, if you won't c-come to him! He's asked you to play the- the-" She dissolved into incoherent sobbing.

"Marisol, who said this?" Will demanded furiously. If someone had threatened his sister and siblings...

"I don't know!" she screamed. She yanked her hand free of Will's and looked at him with red-
rimmed eyes.

"She just woke up," Denise said, wide eyed and alarmed. "She had another nightmare."

"It wasn't a normal dream!" Marisol screamed at her. "It's a warning!"

"It's okay, I believe you." Will assured her. She looked around wildly, staring into the dark corners like her nightmares would take shape and spring from their depths. Will stepped forward and put his arms around her.

"Please, don't let- I don't want..." she babbled incoherently, clutching his t-shirt and sobbing into his shoulder. Her words may have been a jumbled mess, but Will understood her perfectly.

"Shh. It's okay," he whispered, trying to remain calm. What were the odds she and him had had such strange dreams at the same time? "I won't let anyone hurt you. No one is going to come near us. I'll take care of it, okay? Just lay down."

Marisol continued to cry, but she nodded and Denise coaxed her back down onto the bed.

Will turned away and met Austin's eyes. He could see the worry written plain on his face, and Will knew they shared the same unspoken questions.

"I'll take care of it," Will told him quietly, all the while hoping he could. "Denise, will you stay with her?"

"Yeah, of course," Denise replied. She looked up at him anxiously. "Will, what are you-" she began, but Will shook his head. Truthfully, he had no idea what he was going to do, but he knew where he could start.

He turned to leave, and saw Nico standing in the shadows by the door, watching Will with an expression he couldn't place.

Will walked past him, in a silent signal for him to follow. He wasn't in any mood to argue with Nico about staying in the infirmary. Will looked down at his hands and realized they were trembling. He was surprised the others had accepted the idea that Will would take care of everything on his own.

Ever since Michael's disappearance, he felt as though he'd been hiding behind the guise of leadership, waiting for someone to pull back the blinds and discover it was all a façade. He was no leader, he shouldn't be the counselor for his cabin, he was basically inept compared to everyone else-

"Will are you okay?"

Will had no desire to respond to Nico's deigned inquiry, rather, he felt he should remove himself as far from the son of Hades as possible. There was no way it was a coincidence that both he and Marisol had been granted frightening dreams at the same time.

"Will."

Will felt a light hand on his arm and turned in surprise. It was a rare occurrence that Nico touched him willingly, and that alone was enough to bring him to a halt. As soon as Will looked at him, Nico seemed to realize his action. He dropped his hand and looked down uncomfortably.

Will waited for him to say something.
"Sorry," Nico muttered, to his consternation.

"Why?"

Nico bit his lip and folded his arms across his chest. Will stared at him.

He couldn't understand Nico's aversion to physical contact, for the life of him. If he tried to avoid people like the son of Hades did, he figured he would go insane. Perhaps that was what was wrong with Nico? A week in Tartarus and then locked in a jar and he no longer trusted anyone.

"Just... you know," Nico hesitated. "For your sister. For your dreams. I didn't realize how bad it was."

"It's not your fault," Will said.

Nico gave a half-shrug. "I know, but why didn't you tell me?"

"Honestly, I didn't think anything of it," Will muttered. "I mean how could I? The power of prophecy isn't working, so I figured they couldn't be important. I was stupid."

"You think it's something more now?" Nico asked sharply.

"It's something, that's for sure. I need to tell Chiron." Will sighed. Carefully he looked over at the son of Hades, trying to read his face. It revealed nothing. Nico was like journal, the kind with a lock and key, except he had thrown the key away somewhere even he couldn't find it. "Hey-Nico... you didn't happen to have some sort of weird dream did you?" Will asked, trying to sound indifferent. "Like in a hotel room, with a mountain...?"

Nico stared at him in confusion. "No, why?"

"Nevermind."

Before either of them could say anything else, Nico looked over Will's shoulder. "Hi Jason."

Will turned in surprise to see Jason Grace walking towards him.

"Hey guys," he said, with a grin. He looked closely at Nico and frowned. "Nico are you okay? You look kind of sick."

"A hydra tried to eat me," Nico muttered.

"Oh. I see you're adjusting to Camp-life nicely then."

Nico rolled his eyes. "What's up Jason? I doubt you're here just because you love the smell of sick people and medicine first thing in the morning."

Jason's expression darkened. He straightened his glasses on his nose and sighed. "There's an emergency meeting up at the Big House. Apparently it's serious."

"A meeting? You don't say." Nico and Will shared a look.

An hour later Will found himself sitting between Nico and Chiron among all the other Senior Counselors around the table in the Big House.

To his and everyone else's surprise they found themselves looing into a shimmering Iris Message. A pale face, frizzy red hair, freckles, and bright grass-green eyes... Rachel Elizabeth Dare, the
living embodiment of the Oracle of Delphi.

"Hi everyone." Rachel's gaze traveled over the circle of demigods, who sat watching her wearily. Her gaze paused on Will for a second, before coming to a stop on the centaur.

"I wish I could say this is a pleasant surprise Rachel," Chiron said wearily. "How is New Rome treating you?"

Rachel smiled, but it was a thin veiling of the worry etched on her face. "Oh it's wonderful, but we have a bit of a conundrum over here, and I don't think you'll find anything I have to say very pleasant." She looked around the table, where everyone was watching her expectantly, and sighed. "It would seem there is a new prophecy."

Everyone at the table groaned in abject horror.

"I feared as much," Chiron said, astoundingly calm. "I figured it was something bad when you showed up asking for an emergency meeting. Are Reyna and Frank aware? What have they made of it?"

Rachel shook her head solemnly. "None of us can relate it to anything happening over here, so Reyna thought it would be a good idea for me to run it by you guys. Maybe it'll make more sense to you."

Chiron nodded. "Very well. Do you mind sharing it with us?"

"Of course," Rachel said. She lifted a piece of paper in front of her, and read:

'The die has been cast, 
first move met it's mark, 
should the hero not answer, 
there'll be naught but dark.

To be shown the path, 
before dawn of each day, 
This answer they seek; 
It's in the games they must play.

In the aid of the plight 
of the flickering light, 
for one it is vital, 
a rhyme, a fatal title.'

Rachel's voice faded into terse silence.

There was moment in which everyone stared at each other in misery.

Percy crossed his arms. "Right. I haven't the foggiest what that means, but I'm telling you all right now; I'm out. I am so done with prophecies and quests and the whole shebang."

Annabeth waved her hand. "Me too," she said, uncharacteristically reticent. "However, I place my bet that Hera's behind it somehow."

Rachel lowered her piece of paper, brow furrowed. "I wish I could remember what I said, when I said it, and how I said it," she muttered. "At least Frank and Reyna were with me when it happened. Otherwise I could have missed it entirely."
"So, do we have any idea what it means?" Lou Ellen asked, anxiously twirling a strand of her short, strawberry blonde hair between her fingers.

"I think I might have an idea," Will muttered glumly. He felt Nico shift beside him.

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

"You do?" asked Cecil.

"Yeah… well, maybe. I think there's something going on with the Apollo cabin…"

Chiron leaned forward, studying him carefully. "The Apollo cabin? Please explain, Will."

Will shifted uncomfortably under everyone's gazes, and began to tell them about their inability to sleep, their sickness, and the newfound eeriness of the Apollo cabin. Chiron watched him closely throughout, particularly when he informed him about Marisol's dream.

Chiron looked grave by the end of it. "You were right to bring this up Will. It's normal for demigods- even those not related to Apollo- to have important dreams, but not in this magnitude. I fear it may be related to this prophecy somehow."

"It has to be," said Jason. "All that stuff about light, day... the prophecy must have something to do with Apollo," said Jason. He straightened professionally in his chair when everyone turned to him, hopeful for clarity. "What else did Marisol say?"

Will shrugged hopelessly, "Just that someone was asking for me. She didn't know who." He gulped and stared down at the table, acutely aware of Nico's eyes on his face.

"Hang on," said Lou Ellen. "Just because Marisol had a bad dream and then a prophecy popped up, doesn't necessarily mean they're related." She looked apologetically at Will. "No offense to your sister or anything. It was just the one dream right?"

"Actually I just had one, too," Will said quietly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nico look at him sharply. "You did?"

Will nodded mutely.

"When was this Will?" Chiron asked, frowning at him.

"Only an hour or so ago, right before I came here. I fell asleep in the infirmary. I was on my way here to tell you when Jason found us and said a meeting had already been called."

"How long have these dreams been going on Will?" Chiron asked.

"About a week or so," Will muttered sheepishly. "I figured it was because Apollo… well, I guess no one knows what happened to him, but I doubt it's good. Our abilities have been all over the place, acting up. I didn't realize any of this would happen, or I would have come here immediately..."

"You couldn't have known Will," Chiron told him gently. "But it is true. Yours and Marisol's dreams are more than likely related, just as this prophecy and Apollo are somehow related."

"How could it be anything but a normal dream though?" Will asked miserably. "Granted, it was pretty disturbing, but I didn't think the power of prophecy was working at all anymore. The Oracle of Delphi hasn't been active since my dad-"
"This prophecy doesn't come from Apollo," Rachel interrupted him. Will looked at her in confusion.

"What do you mean, Rachel?" Chiron asked. "Who else could it come from?"

Rachel shook her head sadly. "I wish I knew Chiron. I just know it's not from him, it didn't feel right. There was something weird about it, like it was twisted or warped in some way. It's difficult to describe, but believe me about this. I know what Apollo's prophecies are like; this isn't one of them."

Chiron accepted her answer and turned back to Will. "Will, what exactly happened in your dream?"

Will squirmed. He had no desire to divulge to everyone the bizarre recesses of his mind, and he certainly didn't want Nico to know about his dream. He looked over at the son of Hades, but Nico was also watching Will expectantly, eyes bright and curious. Looking around he saw that everyone was watching him expectantly.

"Okay. Yeah sure," Will mumbled, tapping his finger on the wooden table. "Let's see, I was in a room. I thought it kind of looked like a hotel room..." He bit his lip and continued awkwardly. "It sounded like there were crowds cheering, like in a stadium or something. There was a mountain in the distance, outside the window. Someone said they were waiting for me, that they've been asking for me. He asked if I could hear the voices..."

Chiron frowned at him. "'Someone' said this? You don't know who?"

Will swallowed hard. Making a snap decision he said, "No, it was just a voice. It wasn't, like, a corporeal apparition of, say, someone I know or anything..." He faltered, expending all of his strength in the effort it took to not look at Nico. "He said the time is up, or something."

Chiron looked like he was going to ask him something else about his mysterious voice, and Will plunged on hurriedly.

"...and I don't understand what he was talking about either, or what voices he was talking about. None of it makes any sense to me." Will looked at Chiron. "Do you really think these dreams and the prophecy are related?"

"I'm afraid that is definitely how it appears," Chiron said.

"Of course they're related," said Jason, sitting forward. "The first line 'the die has been cast', and the line 'to be shown the path before dawn of each day.' I mean, before dawn any child of Apollo would be asleep, dreaming. Someone is trying to communicate to Will in his dreams, asking him to do something."

"All I've got to say," said Clarisse, "Is that if this is turning into a quest, I'd like to go."

"I don't think that's an option," said Annabeth.

"Why not?" Clarisse exclaimed furiously. "Someone who knows what they're doing should go. Someone who can fight, and has experience." She raised an eyebrow at Will. "No offense Solace."

"None taken," Will said hollowly.

"Clarisse," Chiron said gently, "I know it's unusual, but it seems the message is pretty clear. Will must be the one to go and he may choose whoever he wishes to accompany him."
Will hated the turn the meeting was taking. When he'd wanted to tell Chiron about Marisol, he had certainly not expected a prophecy or a quest to unfold, and most certainly had not expected to be pushed into leading one.

Clarisse huffed angrily and glared at Seymour's head on the wall.

Nico shifted next to him. "But we don't know where we're supposed to be going," he said, looking surprisingly agitated. "You can't just send Will off without a destination or a plan!"

"And we won't," Chiron assured him. "If he is going to be 'shown the way' as the prophecy states, than the best option would be to sleep on it and see where it takes us tomorrow."

Will hated that plan too. If Chiron thought another dream was in store for him tonight, Will was already scared to see it. He did not want a repeat of what had happened an hour ago.

There was a long silence while everyone considered the possibilities. Eventually Chiron broke it, standing up from his wheelchair.

"For now everyone should keep up with your responsibilities and activities. I think it would be best if you did not tell your cabins until we have a better understanding of the situation. We don't need to spread panic at the prospect of another prophecy, especially after what happened with the last one. The last thing we need is another war."

Everyone murmured their agreement and the meeting was adjourned. One by one they trickled out of the Big House. Will remained behind. Nico hesitated by the door looking concerned, but Will waved him onward and he left, casting one more look back as he wandered down the steps.

"Chiron, you don't really think this could lead to another war, do you?" Will asked the centaur.

Chiron pondered Will.

"I certainly hope not Will. But if recent events are anything to go by, I fear you may find yourself in the middle of it."

It was the last thing Will wanted to hear, but he was relieved Chiron didn't lying to him, or try to protect him. The latter happened far too often for Will's liking; everyone looked at him and saw a healer, not a fighter, someone who wouldn't be able to make a hard call if the situation called for it.

"Will, I know what I told the others about not spreading a panic, but I think it would be a good idea for you to inform your siblings of the current situation," Chiron told him.

"Yeah. Okay." Will murmured. He turned to leave, but Chiron wasn't finished.

"And Will?" Will looked back at him.

"It's one thing to fight a battle with swords and weapons; most demigods can do so. A battle of minds, however, is a different story."

Chapter End Notes
To Be Continued...

Thank you to everyone for reading! I would LOVE to hear what people think about it, so please leave a review!
Chapter Three:

Something Wicked This Way Comes

That afternoon, Nico spent nearly an hour trying to locate Will Solace, who had disappeared shortly after the counselor meeting.

He tried the infirmary, the Apollo cabin, and even the archery range, all to no avail. On a whim he wandered out to the lake, where he found Will sitting underneath the trees, the expanse of icy lake stretched out before him, gleaming in the cold sun. He twirled a small bandage around his wrists absentmindedly. Nico was surprised Will wanted to come out here at all after the events from the previous night.

"Will?"

Will jumped at the sound of Nico's voice. He looked around, reaching for his bow, like he was expecting another hydra, but relaxed when he saw Nico. Will didn't answer him and went back to looking at the ground. Nico came closer, hesitated, and then sat down next to him.

"Are you running away now?" Nico asked, echoing Will's own words from the previous night.

"Don't make me laugh," Will murmured, eyeing Nico curiously. He shrugged his shoulders stared out at the icy lake. "Just thinking about stuff."

"Stuff like a quest?" Nico asked lightly. "Or stuff like your dream?"

Will didn't respond to his inquiry immediately. In broad daylight Nico could see his eyes, a halcyon grey-blue, but they were currently dampened with worry. Slight circles remained under his eyes, and Nico wanted to reach out and touch his face, try to brush them away with his thumb. When was the last time Will had actually slept?

Will shrugged slightly. "Both, I guess."

"Are you nervous?" Nico asked him.

Will looked incredulous. "Oh, no, not at all. I think it'll be a piece of cake." He rolled his eyes. "Of course I'm nervous Death Boy." He stared at Nico like he'd asked the most ludicrous question he could imagine. It almost made Nico smile.

"That's not what I meant," Nico said quickly. "Are you worried about what you might see in your dreams tonight?"

Will stared out at the lake, thinking. "It's just a dream right? What's the worst that could happen?" Nico watched as he broke off curtly, and looked down at his hands. He had gone back to twirling the bandages back and forth over his wrists. Nico recognized the look on Will's face, a sort of blank one, like he was trying to conceal how he truly felt. He had often done the same thing.

"Did anything else happen in your dream?" he asked, trying to make it sound like a sympathetic
question and not like an interrogation.

Wil's hands paused for a second, holding the bandages, before he continued on as before. "No. What makes you think that?"

Nico opened his mouth to say that he could tell Will was hiding something but stopped himself just in time. Perhaps he shouldn't push him. Will was, after all, already under a ton of stress. No good would come of pestering him for information he didn't feel comfortable sharing right now. Instead he said, "I just think a lot of times people get scared of telling the truth, if they think someone might get hurt."

Will's eyebrows drew together. "Forget it, Nico. Like I said, its just a dream, right? What's the worst that could happen tonight?"

Nico had no answer to that. He didn't particularly want to tell Will what he had come to know as the truth; that the worst demons were usually inside one's own head. A creation bred of a person's worst thoughts and fears. The difference between reality and dreams was that at least reality you could fight. For a moment Nico felt relieved that his own dreams were merely remnants of the past, memories long passed, that would hopefully fade with time. Will's were of the future, prophecies that would more than likely come to pass. They would only remain as phantasm in his head for a little while before they became reality.

Nico glanced at Will. Sitting in the sunlight with his blonde hair and brilliant blue eyes, he looked angelic, someone who Nico thought should never have to see the darkness in the world. If Nico could have taken from him all of his fear, his worry, and placed them upon himself, he would have. He was already touched by darkness anyhow, what was a little more going to do to him?

"Clarisse was right," Will said, his voice petulant. "I shouldn't be the one leading this quest. It should be someone who actually knows what they're doing."

Nico wasn't sure what to say to him. Along with healing and helping people, it wasn't in his nature to be comforting. He cast his thoughts around, searching for something to say, taking far longer than he should have. "Well, everyone has to start somewhere..." he said haltingly. He grimaced to himself at how half-hearted it sounded.

Will laughed harshly "Yeah, it also has to end somewhere. And I can't help but feel like it's going to end very quickly and with a lot of disappointment, if I go."

"I don't believe that," Nico exclaimed loudly. He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "I mean, that's not true. Why do you think that?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Percy, Jason, Clarisse..." He looked at Nico uncertainly. "You. You guys are all so impressive. Always fighting all these monsters, stopping wars, going up against the God's themselves... I'm not like that."

"Sure you're not," Nico muttered, thinking about the way Will had recklessly snuck onto Half-Blood Hill to scout out the Romans.

"I'm not." Will said quietly, picking at the bandages wrapped around his left wrist. "All my life I've watched others leave for quests, imagining what it would be like to come back as a hero, as a savior to the camp. I never truly thought it would actually happen though, or that that day would creep up on me so unexpectedly. I can barely handle being counselor for my cabin. And now apparently their lives are resting in my hands? What if I fail?"
Nico frowned at him. "You have other peoples lives' in your hands every day in the infirmary. What's the difference?"

"There's a huge difference!" Will exclaimed. "That's healing, looking into people and knowing what's wrong, helping them get better. This is a quest. There'll be fighting. You've seen me fight." Will looked pointedly at him. "I'm terrible with a sword, and the only way I can hit the target with a bow is if I don't aim for it."

Nico couldn't help but smirk. "Then don't aim at the monsters."

Will glared at him. "That's not helpful di Angelo. What if I screw up and I get someone hurt? Or killed? You saw how scared Marisol was. I can't let her down. I can't let any of them down." Will bottom lip was quivering very slightly and Nico watched him in sudden alarm. He really hoped Will didn't start crying. He had no clue where he would begin t handle that. "I shouldn't even be counselor for my cabin- the only reason I am is because everyone before me has died and even then it should have been Austin. At least for the rest of them it was in battle. I think the only reason I was chosen was because I can't fight. Even during battles I spend my time safely in the infirmary, not risking my life like they do."

"That's insane Will," Nico interrupted. "What you do is important. No one can heal people like you. You've saved more lives than anyone at camp. You've saved more lives than anyone I've ever met. That's just as important as knowing how to fight, maybe even more so. It's because of you that we get the chance to keep living and fight another day." Nico felt out of his element comforting Will. Normally it happened the other way around, but this was something Nico felt he needed to say.

"Everyone has different strengths," he continued. "So what if you're not good at fighting? There's a reason no one ever goes on a quest by themselves. It takes more than the ability to swing a sword to succeed on one. That's why you bring your friends."

By the end of his little speech Nico felt hot all over and he promptly clamped his mouth shut before he could say anything else stupid. He thought it all seemed obvious, but Will looked astounded. Nico looked down at the grass, embarrassed.

"Did I save you?" Will asked. Nico looked up to see that Will had his lips pressed together like he was trying not to smile.

Nico scowled. "Save me when?"

"That first day, back on the hill when you were about to shadow travel into oblivion. You think I saved you then?"

Nico narrowed his eyes at him. Clearly he had stroked Will's ego a little too much. "I was not about to shadow travel into oblivion Solace. But maybe just a little," he conceded grudgingly.

Will grinned slightly. "And last night? From the hydra?"

"Don't push it Blondie," Nico muttered. "But yeah. Like that."

Will smiled at him then, bright as the sun. His eyes traveled over Nico's face, just long enough to raise butterflies in his stomach. "Maybe you're right," he sighed. "I'm overreacting. Cecil and Lou have already agreed to come and they're both great fighters. It'll be fine."

Nico blinked in surprise. He was silent for a moment, processing what the he had said.
"Oh," he managed. Nico suddenly felt foolish, following Will out here to talk with him about this quest. Of course Will would want to bring his two best friends, not the weird kid he'd only known for only two weeks. It made perfect sense. Still, it didn't explain the inexplicable hollowness that filled Nico's stomach all of a sudden.

And it wasn't just that he wanted to go to be around Will, he knew, but also because he was growing frustrated with camp life. Nico had only been here for two weeks, yet already he was sick of the routine, the chores, and the capture-the-flag-games. He found routine monotonous and boring, and was beginning to long for any sort of adventure. While a quest wasn't quite what he'd had in mind, it would have solved his dilemma.

Of course, he had also wanted to keep an eye on Will...

"Are you okay?" Will asked, watching him closely.

Nico nodded silently. A lump seemed to be lodging itself in his throat. He reached out and fiddled with a blade of grass, trying to distract himself. To his horror, it turned brown and brittle at his touch and he withdrew his hand immediately, hoping Will hadn't noticed.

"I'd bring you if I could," Will said suddenly. "You know that right?"

Nico looked at him in puzzlement. "Why can't you?"

"It's too dangerous." Will began fiddling with the bandages on his wrist again, avoiding Nico's eyes.

"Too dangerous?" Nico asked in disbelief. "I've been surviving on my own for years Solace. I know what it's like in the real world-." he froze when a sudden thought struck him, "Wait, is this because I just got poisoned? Oh, come on Blondie, I'm fine! I know all about quests- not that I've ever officially been on one, but still-! I can help you." Nico was about ready to resort to begging, but he didn't care. Will was acting completely insane.

"Look, if you're mad at me, I'm sorry," Nico said, starting with the gentle approach. "But I don't understand what I've done wrong."

Will looked at him, shocked. "I'm not mad," he said. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you won't even look at me, and now you're saying I can't come, and you're giving a ridiculous explanation for it!" Nico snapped. "Look, I didn't mean what I said yesterday, and I don't really think your annoying- well, I mean, I do, but that's beside the point..."

Will took a deep breath. "I'm not mad. That's not it, it's not you, I promise."

"Then what is it?"

"It just doesn't feel right, I guess," Will said. No matter how hard Nico tried, Will refused to meet his eyes.

" Doesn't feel right?" Nico repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Please don't ask, Nico. You just can't, trust me. Not after my dream."

"What do you mean not after your dream? What else happened in it?"

Will froze. He looked at Nico, looking more than a little horrified, like he'd accidentally said more
than he intended. He shifted nervously and Nico could practically see the gears turning in his head as he tried to find a viable cover-up.

"I already told you. I told everyone at the meeting," Will said quickly.

"Gee, why don't I believe you," Nico said. "There's something else your not saying."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"I'm saying you do foolish things when you try to protect people. I don't need protection, Solace. I know how to take care of myself," Nico growled.

"Not from this," Will said softly. "Not from me."

"What are you talking about Solace?" Nico groaned. "I'm so sick of riddles."

"I don't know how to explain Nico," Will yelled. "I don't understand what's happening and I don't know what to do. If anything happens, if I screw up, or die, or start a war, or get anyone killed... I don't know how I'll live with myself. I'll go on this quest since I have to, but I'm going to drag people down with me! My brothers and sisters are terrified. If something is wrong with our dad, it could be disastrous for us."

"Listen to me," Nico snapped. "No one is going to die. Not Marisol or Austin, not any of your siblings, and certainly not you! I won't let it."

Will raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"You won't let me die?"

"No."

Will stared at him mutely. Nico's face felt hot, and he cleared his throat nervously. "I know what it's like to be haunted by dreams, not knowing what's going to happen. What aren't you telling me?"

"It's none of your business, okay?" Will snapped at him. "You're not coming with me and that's final. I'd rather bring Lou Ellen or Cecil or anyone, instead of you!"

Nico felt ice in his stomach, like Will had stabbed him with his own Stygian Iron blade. He'd never heard Will sound so angry before. Heck, Nico had been beginning to think it wasn't possible for Will to get angry at all. While Nico wasn't surprised that Will no longer wanted anything to do with him (it happened with everyone, sooner or later) he was dismayed at how fast the tide had turned. It stung.

It also made him mad.

And unfortunately, Nico had a tendency to get mean when he was mad.

"Right back at you Solace," he snapped. "I never actually said I wanted to go with you anyways. So good luck, because your going to need all the help you can get!"

Will's face was white by the end of Nico's little tirade.

Without further ado, Nico sprung to his feet and left.

"Nico, wait," Will shouted from behind him, but he didn't feel like listening anymore.
Instead he jogged back to camp, desperate to put as much distance between him and Will Solace as possible. It seemed it was the reckoning of their relationship; Nico had tried to extend his support to Will, but instead got shot down. His pride was wounded and all he wanted was to be alone.

Still, Nico wished he could take back this entire conversation, both the harsh words ones he had directed at Will, and the one's which made Nico feel vulnerable. Even if the blonde fool was a complete cretin, he'd had a lot of pressure thrust on him over the last twenty-four hours. He didn't deserve to be treated so poorly.

Nico intended to go back to his own cabin and sulk, but his feet had their own plans. Five minutes later he found himself knocking on the front door of the Hypnos cabin.

There was no answer, which didn't surprise him. It was more a politeness, and he entered anyway. To his expectations, everyone inside was asleep.

"Clovis." Nico knocked on the headboard of the kid's bed, to no avail. Clovis gurgled softly in his sleep. He was wearing a yellow snuggie and curled up around one of his pillows, snoring monstrously. Nico watched in grotesque fascination as syrupy drool dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He shook himself.

"Clovis, wake up!" Nico shouted in his ear.

A single eye cracked open and he gazed blearily at Nico.

"Nico? Oh Gods, am I having a nightmare?"

"Er, no. But thanks for that," Nico said. "Listen Clovis, I know at the meeting you said you haven't noticed any weird dreams coming in, but will you keep an eye on the Apollo cabin tonight?"

Clovis blinked tiredly at him.

"Yeah, sure thing Nico. I'll keep an eye on Will for you," he mumbled.

Nico flushed. "I didn't say Will! I mean all of them," he stammered. "I'm worried about all of them, they've all been having nightmares-" He broke off when Clovis began to snore loudly again. Well, at least Clovis had said he would monitor Will. Nico figured that was good enough for now.

Will

Will only lasted five minutes before he couldn't stand it any longer. He left his seat by the lake and ran back to the cabins, determined to find Nico di Angelo and make him listen to reason.

His first instinct was to check the Hades cabin, but Nico wasn't there. After searching far and wide, he began to wonder if Nico had actually made good on his threat to leave camp. The idea made Will feel nauseous. At last Will caught sight of Nico emerging from the Hypnos cabin.

"Thank the God's," Will muttered, running over to the son of Hades. "I was worried I'd have to search all of New York to find you."

Nico noticed Will and scowled. "I can travel a lot farther than one state, you know. Your best bet would be the Underworld."

"Okay fine. I'll remember to look in the Underworld next time I can't find you."

Nico took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Don't be stupid, Solace. My dad would kill you," he
muttered. "I don't feel like fighting, okay? What do you want?"

Will hesitated. Nico didn't seem overly angry anymore, and was eyeing Will with more of a detached weariness, like he had met all of Nico's lowest expectations. The thought was disheartening.

Actually Will had no idea what he wanted to say. He still had no inclination to tell Nico about his dream, but he had to say something.

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay," he said softly.

"Of course I'm fine," Nico said. "I'm used to people-

"I'm sorry," Will blurted out. "I didn't mean to flip out on you. I'm just under a lot of stress right now."

Will hesitated to see if Nico had anything to say, but he was silent.

"I'd give anything to bring you Nico, but I can't. Please believe me. You have to trust me."

Nico watched him critically for a long moment. Will wished he knew what he was thinking, if Nico completely hated him or if he would accept his answer. Gradually the hardness in Nico's eyes faded and he sighed.

"I believe you Will."

That night, Will stayed up later than usual, talking with Kayla, Denise, Marisol, and Austin. Marisol had decided to come back to the cabin after her frightening scene in the infirmary. They offered to wait up with him, but Will assured them he was fine and that he would feel better knowing they were getting some rest.

If they don't have anymore nightmares, Will thought to himself.

He wandered outside and sat on the front steps. He didn't know how long he sat out there for, but eventually he heard the door creak open behind him.

"Will can I speak with you?" Marisol asked.

"Yeah, sure," Will said. He shifted over, and Marisol sat down next to him on the step. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked her.

She smiled faintly at him and nodded, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"I'm so sorry Will," she said quietly. "I never meant to put this pressure on you."

"It's not your fault, Marisol. You didn't start this," Will told her immediately. "We've all felt like something was off for a while now. I'm the one that should have done something sooner. You just gave me the kick in the butt I needed. I hope you can forgive me."

Marisol watched him quietly for a short second, before leaning over and hugging Will. "There's nothing to forgive Will. Just watch out for yourself, okay?"

Will smiled at her. "I always do."

She looked slightly doubtful but nodded. "I'll see you in the morning then. Don't stay up too late."
She went inside, and Will was left on the front porch, staring into the night.

After a while he wandered inside and lay down on his bed. He couldn't sleep, nervousness of what might come danced in his stomach as he stared up at the bunk above him. His thoughts drifted to his other little sister, Melanie. He wondered what she was doing, maybe studying for school. He had spoken to her a couple days ago, through Iris message and she had mentioned something about an English test she was worried about. Will could sympathize- he sucked at reading and writing.

He wondered if his mom was working the night shift at the clinic right now. She was a vet, an animal lover. Will had always thought it strange how she liked working the night shifts. She claimed it was more peaceful, but it was still odd to him.

She was similar and yet so different from Will. Of course, she wasn't his biological mother, but pretty darn close.

Will had no idea what had happened to his real mother. Taking a deep breath, Will closed his eyes.

Hey dad, Will thought. I don't know where you are or what happened to you after the war, but I think you should know there's some strange stuff going on here. I think we- your children- might be in danger. Maybe even you. I know your busy being a God and whatnot, but if you could maybe give us some sort of sign that you're alright, that would be great. Er, thanks.

Will waited, heartbeat quickening, but there was no reply.

He lay there, waiting hopefully for as long as he could, but as the minutes passed his eyelids grew heavy and eventually flickered shut.

This time there was no image, nothing but infinite darkness, but a cacophony of voices grated softly in the dark;

"Child of the sun, twice now we have spoken. Our invitation is extended; your presence is requested. Should you fail to show, know it is not you who will pay the price. Should you fail to show, nevermore will the sun rise in the sky. It's days are limited now. Be not afraid of the night, for into it you must delve. Let the one who understands it guide you. We have told you the expense of delay. Go at once, and speak these words only to the messenger. We await your company in our halls."

Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

Thank you for reading! Please leave a review!
Will was not a naturally sneaky person. He spent a good twenty minutes packing his bag and trying to get out of his cabin without anyone noticing. Despite his best efforts, he still tripped over a random stethoscope laying on the ground. Really? he thought. They can't be bothered to put away their priceless medical equipment?

Will had half-a-mind to wake them all up and rage at their unsanitary equipment storage. Instead he was forced to make a mental note- for after he survived the quest- that he would be able to chew-out his siblings and question them on whether healing was really the best career path for them to be taking in life. With that sort of hygienic medical practice no doubt I'll return and find snot-nosed, plague-infested, mutated demigods frolicking indifferently through a soon-to-be-barren wasteland of a camp.

Gods, how would they survive without him?

When Will finally escaped out the front door, he relaxed a little. By glancing at his alarm clock, he estimated he had gotten at least a few hours of sleep before he'd had that dream. He was certain now that Jason and Chiron's predictions were correct- that the dreams were messages, partly a cry for help, partly a warning over what would happen if he did not answer it. Will already knew whom he was going to bring with him. Unfortunately, he also knew now whom he needed to bring.

Lou Ellen and Cecil, he had spoken to the previous day. The daughter of Hecate and son of Hermes had eagerly offered to accompany Will, should a quest unfold. They were easily Will's best friends, two people he knew he could share anything with.

The last person he needed to bring, Will knew, was going to require some serious damage-control.

Will's throat constricted at the thought of Nico.

Their fight the previous day had been abominable and Will had wanted nothing more than to tell him the truth, that there was nothing wrong with Nico, that the reason Will couldn't look at him or be around him was not because he was frightened or repulsed, but quite the opposite. If Chiron believed that Will's dream was actually a prophecy, Will was ready to fight it as hard as he could. The thought of Nico being hurt, of Will himself being the one to cause it, was unbearable. He also found it unbearable to have to tell Nico what had actually happened in his dream. It was just too horrible to utter aloud.

Will knew he'd had no control over what he saw, but he still felt strangely ashamed of it. He was the son of Apollo, he should be able to make sense of prophecies.

But there shouldn't be prophecies at all. The power of Delphi vanished along with Apollo.

How could these dreams even be prophecies? Then again, Rachel had said the prophecy felt wrong, like it wasn't coming from Apollo at all…

Will forced the thoughts from his head. He had too little information to go on right now. Right now
he needed to find Nico.

The idea of bringing Nico on this quest after Will's first dream was detestable, but he no longer saw another option. Will certainly didn't want to lose his friend, and yesterday he had thought that driving Nico away from him was preferable over risking the son of Hades' life, but now with this newest dream looming in his mind he wasn't so sure.

Whatever those words had meant, it sounded to Will like Apollo was in trouble, like his days were numbered. Apollo had never let Will down before when he'd asked him for guidance- granted his guidance usually wasn't the best- but Will was not about to be the one to let his father saving his dad meant Nico di Angelo had to come with them... Will had to take the risk.

Outside it was pitch-black as Will made his way to the Hecate cabin, but it was fairly easy to get Lou Ellen out of her cabin alone because of her mirror.

Lou Ellen had shown it to Will and Cecil before. It was a small, hand-held antique mirror, gold-encrusted and beaded with moonstones. She'd said it had been passed down from her great-great-great grandmother, or something like that, who'd been a daughter of Aphrodite. With the mirror, and a little magic of her own, she was able to send and receive direct Iris messages. Will didn't see her use it much, but he had a sneaking suspicion she used it a lot more than she let on.

Primarily, Will would bet, to send messages to Cecil.

It only took a couple of minutes before she tiptoed out the front door of the Hecate cabin to meet with Will, where he stood tapping his fingers anxiously on the deck railing.


Will raised his eyebrows at her appearance. Her strawberry blonde hair, which had been long and straight the other day, was now knotted into a bunch of braids, with black and white beads woven into the various strands.

"You're one to talk," Will told her. "Don't tell me you going for dreads again. Remember what happened last time?"

A year ago Lou Ellen had gone through something Will could only describe as a hippie-phase. She gave her self dreadlocks, wore nothing but bizarre beaded shawls, and claimed she was going all-natural and vegan. After a month she gave up when she wanted a cheeseburger, and ended up having to cut most of her hair off to get it untangled.

"Don't mention it," she hissed, hazel eyes glinting. "Seriously though, Will, you look awful. You're all shaky and sweaty-" Her eyes widened and she gasped. "Oh no, did you have a dream? What happened?"

"Yes I had a dream. First of all, we need to leave immediately. Second of all, I am not all sweaty! Thirdly, you smell weird."

Lou Ellen grinned at him. "Isn't it interesting? It's a concoction of pine tree essential oil and lavender! I mixed it myself."

"Gods, that's horrifying," Will muttered. "But I'm sure Cecil would love to hear about your witchy potion-brewing. If you still want to go on this quest we need to leave now. I mean-" Will faltered. "Do you still want to go?"
"Of course I do, Will. I'm not letting you do this alone. I know you; you'll need all the help you can get!" Lou Ellen smiled slightly to soften the jibe.

"Thanks," Will told her. "You should pack a bag then. When you've done that can you also go wake up Cecil and explain what's going on to him. I'll meet you guys on Half-Blood Hill in ten minutes. I'll explain when I get there. There's something I've got to do first."

"Sure thing," said Lou Ellen.

She crept back into her cabin and Will made his way to Cabin Thirteen. He paused for a moment before knocking apprehensively on the obsidian door. After a few seconds, it opened soundlessly and Nico di Angelo stood in the doorway, yawning and rubbing his eyes. His ring reflected on the moonlight.

For a moment Will's breath caught, and he stared at the son of Hades, unsure how to proceed.

Nico was wearing loose, black pajama bottoms and his classic black skull t-shirt. His feet were bare, as were his arms. It was the first time Will had ever seen him not wearing a jacket, beside when he had been a patient in the infirmary. Now that Will wasn't focusing all of his attention on trying to patch up claw-marks, he noted that despite Nico's slight stature, he had a surprising amount of muscle. The look suited Nico, Will thought. A second later he thought of how pathetic that was since Nico was still more covered than anyone else ever was at camp.

"Will," Nico groaned, "what are you-"

Will interrupted him, not willing to give either of them the chance to start fighting again. "Do you want to come on this quest?" he asked fearfully, hoping it didn't sound like an accusation.

Nico eyed him wearily. "Yeah..." Will saw his eyes travel him, down to his sandaled feet and then back up to his face. Nico's scowl lessened measurably and his expression became concerned. "Will, what's going on? Why are you dressed? It two-am."

Will shook his head at his questions. "I had a dream. If you're coming you need to pack. We'll meet Lou Ellen and Cecil and I'll explain," Will murmured. "We need to leave right now."

Nico bit his lip and lowered his eyes to the ground. "Will," he said softly, "it's okay. If you really don't think I should come, I- I understand. You need to do what you think is right for the quest, not just what you think will make me feel better."

"No!" Will gasped. "That's not what I'm doing. I've changed my mind. You were right before and I think you do need to come."

Will move closer to Nico, recklessly reaching out to touch his arm as if the motion would help support his words, but Nico shifted away from him. Will stopped, fazed, and withdrew his hand hurriedly. Despite two weeks of prescribed check-ups from him, Nico was still averse to physical contact. Even from Will.

"I want you," Will continued. The he blushed at his questionable wording. "Like, to come with me, I mean, us. Come with us. Lou Ellen and Cecil are that way." Will pointed in a random direction, away from Nico. He chuckled awkwardly and rambled on, "Obviously, I don't want you..." For the love of Gods Solace, stop talking. Will gulped and looked anywhere but at the dark haired boy in front of him.

"Er, okay..." Nico said, looking utterly nonplussed.
Will looked up at him and caught the sight of the corners of Nico's mouth turned up slightly, before he could force them down. In the silence, Will became aware that his heart beat was raised. A sudden gust of wind lapped against his back and he shivered. He thought back quickly, making sure he had remembered to pack his favorite hoodie in his backpack.

"Give me a sec. You can come inside if you want." Nico disappeared inside his cabin.

Will hesitated a moment before entering the Hades cabin for the first time in his life. The inside was every bit as somber and funereal as the exterior, with the exception of a few less skeletons. Will smirked at the couple of beds nestled in the corners.

Nico had complained to Will about his cabin when he first arrived, and Will had asked why he disliked it.

"You'd hate it too, if you felt like a vampire rising from eternal slumber each morning," Nico had said. At the time, Will placed it due to Nico's near-delirium after the battle, but looking around, he understood.

"Alright, ready?" Nico's modulated voice interrupted his thoughts. He looked at him and saw he had changed into dark jeans, his ripped black Converse sneakers, and topped off the look with his aviator jacket. It was patched up and re-sewn in some places. Will wondered if Hazel had fixed it for him. His short Stygian iron blade gleamed menacingly at his side.

"Yeah."

They left together, walking in silence to the entrance of camp. On Half-Blood Hill, they found Lou Ellen and Cecil waiting impatiently under the giant pine tree. If they were surprised to see Nico with Will, they concealed it well.

"So what's the plan?" Cecil asked Will, fiddling with the zipper on his backpack, which appeared to be stuffed full, close to breaking point. Lou Ellen smirked at the son of Hermes.

"What on earth did you put in there Cecil?"

"You know, just stuff... things that could be helpful-"

"Like an iPad?" she asked, kneeling down and unzipping the bag. "And a laptop? And a... blankie?" She held up a small, fluffy, canary-yellow blanket with goldfish on it. "Are you serious?" she giggled.

"Oh shut up," Cecil huffed, snatching it from her hand and stuffing it feverishly back into his bag. "It's from my dad."

"Oh thank gods," said Will. "I'm glad you didn't think that was worth stealing or something. Hermes might be even more embarrassing than my dad then."

"Whenever I imagine Apollo, I picture the guy from the Jimmy Dean Commercials," Cecil offered.

"Um, not quite," Will muttered. At the thought of Apollo, Will's smile faded and a lump clotted in his throat. "Speaking of Hermes, I was kind of hoping you could pray to him for me," Will said. Cecil paused in re-zipping his bag, and looked at Will in surprise. "I can try. Why though?"
"And why are we sneaking off in the middle of the night?" Lou Ellen asked.

Will took a deep breath. He knew he'd have to explain himself sooner or later, but that didn't mean he was eager to do so. Plus, he considered some of his most recent dreams deeply personal.

Reluctantly, he told them all he could remember from the message he'd received.

"Oh my Gods," Lou Ellen whispered, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Do you have any idea who was speaking," asked Nico, watching Will's face intently.

Will shook his head. "No. It sounded like... more than one person, all speaking together. They didn't give any clue as to who they were, or where they would lead us to. They said we need to tell the messenger this." Will looked between his three friends, reading their equally worried faces. "I know it's short notice to leave now, but Marisol said that something bad might happen if we don't act fast. I don't want to risk waiting."

Cecil stood up suddenly, tossing his backpack over his broad shoulders. "This messenger they spoke of- you think it's my dad?"

Will nodded. "That was my first thought. Hermes is the messenger of the God's, and he's good friends with Apollo. If anyone could help us figure out what's happening, it's him. I think it's be a good start."

"Okay. Give me a second..." Cecil squeezed his eyes shut, his lips moving soundlessly in the dark. He was still for a minute, before opening his eyes.

"Did he answer?"

Cecil nodded. "He told us to get out of range of the camp border and he'd pick us up."

"Pick us up?" Asked Nico, as they walked down the hill towards the highway. "What does that mean? Aren't we just talking with him?"

"He didn't say."

They stopped when they reached the asphalt highway. There was no sign of any cars or people in either direction. Or a god, for that matter.

"What's that?" asked Will. He pointed to the center of the road where a bright splash of purple caught his eye. Had it not been for his excellent night-vision, he would have missed it completely. They walked over to it and Cecil picked it up.

"It's some sort of ticket," he said slowly. He shook some dirt off of it and then read in Greek:


Cecil looked at them in confusion. "I don't understand-"

He was interrupted when Lou Ellen looked past him and screamed.

Will followed her line of sight, just in time to be blinded by a pair of headlights as a car barreled straight into them. He just had time to throw his arm protectively over his face, before he was
inexplicably enveloped by dim lights, soft jazz, the sleek interior of what appeared to be a limousine-

It all happened so fast, and was over almost as quickly as it began.

The next thing Will knew, he was standing on a sidewalk, surrounded by honking cars, under-dressed pedestrians, and a dazzling display of city lights. Will peeked timidly through his fingertips before lowering his hands. Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil stood next to him, looking just as stunned.

"Wh-where are we?" Lou Ellen stammered, looking around them in a daze.

"If that ticket is anything to go by, my guess is Las Vegas, Nevada," said Cecil

A scantily-clad female in sequined stilettos strutted past Nico. He side-stepped straight into Will in his desperation to get out of her path. When he almost tripped into the traffic, Will reached out to steady him, accidentally grabbing him around the waist. Nico's breath hitched when they pressed together, and Will released him immediately. His heart pounded, whether from the close proximity to Nico or their unexpected lightspeed-travel, he couldn't say. He hoped it was the latter.

"Sorry," Will muttered.

"It's fine-" Nico froze suddenly and stared straight ahead. "You have got to be kidding me..."

"What?" Will asked.

Nico shook his head wordlessly, and pointed at the colossal building in front of them. Will thought it looked like some sort of fancy hotel, hundreds of multi-colored windows, about ten stories tall and monstrous in size.

He looked at the glowing letters mounted on the side, and read;

"The Lotus Hotel and Casino."

It took 5 minutes for Nico to tell them everything he knew about the Lotus Hotel and Casino.

"Hermes must be inside," Lou Ellen exclaimed.

"We can't go in there," Nico almost yelped.

"I don't think we have a choice," said Cecil. "If that's where he wants us to meet him."

Nico ground his teeth together but followed them inside, like he already knew he was going to regret this.

The lobby was spectacular, decked out in sculptures and chandeliers and every other expensive thing Will could imagine, all of it frosted in crystals and jewels.

"Welcome to the Lotus Hotel and Casino!" a bubbly voice off to the side, and they turned.

A young woman in a suit stood behind a glass counter. She was arranging paperwork into a neat pile, lacquered nails click-clacking on the countertop. Her blonde hair was arranged into an impeccable ponytail, her makeup painted on with elegant artistry. To Will, she looked like she could star as the quintessential receptionist in a magazine advertisement. A white Lotus flower was tucked into the front pocket of her jacket. Her name tag read "Agnete".
Agnete's teeth flashed ivory as she beamed at them. "Have you all been here before? Oh, wait- but of course you haven't!" She gave an effervescent giggle, laughing at her personal little joke. "How silly of me! I'm new here, you know," she told them conspiringly. She winked a thickly-lashed eye at Will. "How long do you plan on staying?" she asked.

"Actually, we're just stopping by to-"

"That's so sweet!" Agnete interrupted, and she looked like she believed it with all her heart. "But trust me," she waggled a plum-manicured finger, "you'll never want to leave this place. It's just so wonderful! Today, we'll be having a paint-ball contest before breakfast- it's an all-you-can-eat buffet! - followed by a real-life role-play mystery adventure in the style of Sherlock Holmes- that's takes place in our brand-new state-of-the-art holodeck! There something here for everyone." Agnete began thrusting 'activities' and 'information' pamphlets at Nico.

"Oh, that sounds so fun!" squealed Lou Ellen.

Will nodded in agreement, admiring a snippet about a 4-hour medical seminar. That could be interesting, he thought. He read on, muttering the words under his breath. "Featuring guest-speaker Dr. Apollo, M.D, M.S., D.P.M., D.M.D, D.V.M, GYN..." Will snapped out of his reverie, as he registered what he had read.

Agnete saw him reading the pamphlet. For a moment, her perfectly composed expression of delight flickered. She snatched the pamphlet from Will's grasp.

"Oh, that's been cancelled sweetheart."

"Why?" asked Will. Agnete clicked her nails on the counter-top nervously.

"Our guest speaker is, uh... indisposed."

"What happened to him?"

"He's busy," Agnete spoke through clenched teeth.

"Doing what?"

"That's none of your concern, sweetheart." Icicles clung to her voice. "Don't worry about that. You go have fun."

When Will said nothing else, she forced some sort of credit card into their hands, bid them farewell, and returned to her desk. Will felt her gaze burning into his back as they walked away.

Will, Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil left the lobby and entered the main room.

"Holy-" Lou Ellen choked. Will couldn't blame her; the place was incredible, filled with games, rides, restaurants... The food court was complete with a Starbucks, McDonald's, and a Chipotle (Will's favorite). The large directory ahead of them claimed that just down the left hallway, past the water park, and the petting zoo (featuring the last flock of cannibalistic Dodo Birds), was an O.R. (Operating Room) demonstration. This was such a great idea! Will thought ecstatically. He no longer remembered why they had come here in the first place, but he was glad they were there now.

"Guys, we totally have to stay here for a while," Cecil said dreamily, gazing into the closest gift-shop. "Look at all those HD cameras for sale... those are expensive. And they're not even padlocked down..."
Will rolled his eyes.

"No! We need to stay focused," Nico snapped, glowering resentfully at the arcade games. "We need to find Hermes. Remember, time is passing more quickly outside of here. We need to move fast."

"You're such a party-pooper, Death Boy!" Will nudged him playfully, prompting Nico to glare ferociously at him.

"Snap out of it, you guys. We're not here to party," Nico searched through the various mobs of people. "He has to be around here somewhere..."

"Looking for me?" said a deep voice.

They spun to see a man sitting in one of the booths, watching them. Warm blue eyes, salt-and-pepper hair curling over his forehead. He wore navy blue running shorts, sneakers, and a long-sleeve grey pullover sweatshirt. In his right hand he held a blue phone. A key chain of a small gold caduceus dangle from the corner.

The man held out a hand to Will.

"Hermes, God of messages, travel, and thievery, at your service."
Hermes' eyes skimmed the four demigods, pausing momentarily on Will, and then coming to a stop on Cecil.

"Hello, son."


"How ya doing buddy?" Hermes asked warmly.

"Good..." Cecil muttered.

"How's your life?"

"Good."

"How's school?"

"Boring."

"Good. You're what now? Ten?"

"Fourteen."

"Oh. Huh. You look younger."

"Thanks."

They eyed each other awkwardly.

Cecil seemed unsure how to act and Will sympathized. It had to be strange to meet you're immortal, all-powerful god of a parent. Will had yet to meet his own. And if we fail on this quest, I never will. Will hated to interrupt what was possibly the most uncouth father-son bonding-moment he'd ever witnessed, but time was of the essence.

"Lord Hermes," Will said abruptly, "we were hoping to speak with you about my dad."

Hermes turned his gaze from Cecil to Will, "Apollo's son... I wish I could say I'm surprised to be hearing from you. Have a seat and we'll talk." He motioned for them to sit in the booth with him.

Will, Nico, and Lou Ellen squished into one side, while Cecil sat next to his father. Nico looked less than pleased when he realized he was sandwiched in the middle.

"Did you send that, uh, transportation-thingamajig?" asked Lou Ellen.

"Why yes I did." Hermes said proudly. "Isn't it the coolest thing ever?"

"It is!" Cecil agreed enthusiastically, while Lou Ellen turned green again.
"Lord Hermes-" Will began anxiously, but Hermes waved him off.

"I know, I know. Cecil said you had some questions for me when we spoke. We'd better get to it-
time's a-ticking." Hermes waved his hand and five sodas appeared in front of them.

"Something strange is happening with all the Apollo kids," Will began. As quickly and concisely as
possible he explained the message he had received and their quest. He tried not to sound too
worried, but by the time he'd finished his voice was starting to tremble. "...and I was thinking
maybe you had some idea what was going on?"

Hermes didn't look surprised by anything Will had said.

"You know the reason I came to this casino was to find Apollo myself," he said. "Zeus sent him to
work here, and now he's gone off the grid, completely disappeared. Artemis has been trying to
track him down as well, but Zeus isn't concerned. The way he sees it, Apollo is simply pulling his
usual drama, running away, sneaking out after being grounded." Hermes pouted into his root beer.
"I don't believe it so. Apollo may be obnoxious but he wouldn't leave his sister hanging like this.
Or me. And after all you've just said, it only confirms my suspicions."

"Your suspicions?" Will asked, but Hermes seemed to be talking more to himself than the four
demigods surrounding him.

"This is all my fault, I should have made Zeus listen. I knew something was wrong," Hermes
muttered looking upset. "I mean, after his punishment anything could have happened. It was
foolish of Zeus..."

"So Zeus did do something to Apollo?" Nico interjected. "We know he was angry at him after the
battle, but not much else. Apollo made a mistake, but it seems sort of harsh to single him out."

"Zeus didn't think so," Hermes said. "While he was loathe to punish his own son, it wasn't
something he was willing to let go freely. I suppose he thought it would be a lesson to all of us in
the future. An example of what happens when we're weak enough to be manipulated by flattery and
vanity from our children." Hermes scowled and picked at the table.

"Lord Hermes, what exactly is Apollo's punishment?" asked Will.

"He lost his powers and was banished from Olympus."

"What?" Will gasped.

"Not permanently," Hermes added hastily. "Zeus told him he could return if he found a way to
redeem himself, but before he could do so he had to serve down here for a year, under the owner of
this hotel."

"How original of Zeus, banishing him to earth," muttered Lou Ellen. "At least this place is pretty
rad, so it couldn't have been too bad for him."

Hermes shook his head at her.

"This is merely the setting of his punishment, my dear. After that nasty business with Octavian,
Zeus thought Apollo was too easily manipulated by his children. If he wasn't willing go against
them, then he should have the burden removed for a while. A year inside this place would certainly
do the job."

Will understood the implications of what Hermes was saying and felt hollow.
If Apollo was forced to spend a year in the Lotus Hotel and Casino, by the time he was released all of his children would be long dead. He would completely miss their lives, and they him. For a moment, Will couldn't help but feel a little pleased that his dad had potentially been kidnapped by monsters.

"When Python was reborn, I became concerned for Apollo's safety," Hermes continued. "Apollo may have beaten him before, but that was a long time ago. And without any powers, he wouldn't stand a chance if Python came after him."

Will looked at him, startled. He had heard that his father's old enemy had been reborn, but he never considered the possibility that Python might be of significance now that Gaea was defeated.

"You think Python kidnapped Apollo?" Nico asked, echoing Will's thoughts.

"Not directly, that's for sure. Snakes don't have hands, so that wouldn't be easy." Hermes was met with blank stares. He rolled his eyes. "That was a joke. But seriously, if I know anything about Python, it's that he's devious and deceitful. He prefers indirect attacks and is great at misleading his enemies. It hardly matters now however," Hermes sighed. "Look kids, even if I did know where Apollo is, I couldn't help him now that I've lost it."

"Lost what?" Will asked, hoping for any bit of information that could help him find his dad.

Hermes sighed. "The vial. They stole it from me. It's inconceivable is what it is. I'm the God of Thievery for my sake. Who do they think they are? I'm telling you this place is run by hooligans."

"Wait," said Cecil. "What is this vial? How can it help Apollo?"

Hermes shook his head.

"I'm afraid it doesn't matter any more, son. It's been stolen from me."

"Who stole it?" Cecil asked his father curiously.

Will almost found it amusing that someone had stolen from the god of thievery. He supposed karma had finally come back to bite Hermes when he least expected it.

Instead of answering Cecil's question, Hermes began talking to himself softly, lost deep in thought.

"All of this just because Zeus thought he should be punished for something that he didn't even do. It's not Apollo's fault he's obnoxious and egocentric! Where does Zeus think he gets it from?" He looked nervously at the sky suddenly. "No offense or anything."

"Do you have any idea who took this vial?" Will asked Hermes.

"Those who run this hotel of course."

"Lotus Eaters?" Nico leaned forward.

"Yes."

"Do you know where they're keeping it?" asked Cecil.

Hermes pondered him.

"My guess would be in the basement," he said, "where they keep every little trinket and knickknack they come across. It beats me why they're so fond of being underground... They're too
careful though- spells have been placed, preventing me from going down there..."

Hermes expression brightened and his eyes developed a mischievous glint. Will could practically see the light-bulb ping on in his head. "Of course, if someone less impressive than myself were to wander down there..."

"I'll steal it back," Cecil promised.

Hermes looked proud.

"What's in this vial that's so important?" Nico asked.

Hermes looked uncomfortable. "Oh yes, let's see. I mentioned how Zeus temporarily took away all of Apollo's power right? Well, he had to keep it all somewhere..."

They all gaped at him.

"Zeus just gave you all of Apollo's power? In a little vial?" Lou Ellen asked disbelieving.

"Of course not!" Hermes rolled his eyes. "That would be absurd. No, I stole it from him, obviously."

"And you lost it?!" Will exclaimed, feeling furious. He forced his voice lower, sheepishly, and added, "Lord Hermes."

"Look, there's no point crying over spilled nectar," Hermes said. "We just need to get it back."

"You said 'we'," Will told him. "Does that mean you're going to help us get it?"

"In this case 'we' means 'you'," Hermes said shortly. "I will be heading back up to Olympus to give Zeus the old 'I told you so' about his son."

"Good luck with that," Lou Ellen muttered, but very quietly, "after you stole the vial full of his son's powers."

Hermes ignored her.

"Also, when you find this vial, ah... don't drop it. That would be bad," Hermes said helpfully.

Will, Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil stood up to leave, but Hermes wasn't finished.

"Oh, and one more thing! Should you guys be discovered, captured, tortured, skinned and broiled alive in a vat of acid, etc... don't tell them it was me who sent you," Hermes winced. "That would be most annoying."

By the time Will had opened his mouth to gape at him, Hermes was gone.

"Employees Only."

It sounded promising. After Hermes disappeared the four of them quickly located an elevator at the end of a corridor.

"Uh-uh," gasped Nico, when he saw Will push the button. "There is no freaking way are we cramming ourselves into a little moving box."

Will looked at him in disbelief. "Don't tell me you're afraid of elevators."
"Of course I'm not!" snapped Nico. "More like... confined spaces that could send me plummeting to my death."

This didn't surprise Will. He'd heard from Percy that Nico had been kept prisoner by the giants in some sort of bronze jar. He thought of Nico, all alone and unable to fight back or escape, and was filled with rage. Too bad, he thought, that the giants are already dead, or else I'd hunt them down and kill them myself.

"Sorry Nico, but I don't see any stairs," Will told him.

"It's fine," sighed Nico. He held out his hand.

Will, thinking excitedly that Nico wanted to hold hands and face his fears of the elevator together, took it eagerly.

Excitement turned to horror when Nico also grabbed hold of Lou Ellen and Cecil. A second later he found himself whipped into sudden darkness, surrounded by the eerie whispers of the dead. They reappeared in a different hallway. Will gasped in surprise, taking a minute to recover, before understanding what had just happened.

Next to him Nico stumbled slightly.

"You idiot!" Will shouted at him, who had bent over and put his hands on his knees, looking even paler than usual. "I didn't bring you along so you could kill yourself the first chance you got! What's the matter with you?"

"Relax Blondie," Nico groaned, straightening up. "If we wasted time trying to find the stairs, we'd never make it out of here in the same century."

"That's why we were going to take the elevator," Will enunciated slowly, like he was arguing with a two-year-old. "And don't call me 'Blondie'," he added as an afterthought.

"There's no way in Hades that I will ever get on an elevator, when I can just shadow-travel wherever I want to go. Besides, if you're so against it, why did you take my hand?"

"I thought you wanted to-," Will spluttered to a stop. "You know what, I don't have to explain myself to you Death Boy. There's just no point in trying to have a reasonable conversation with you, is there?"

"I'm the unreasonable one?" Nico looked outraged.

They fell silent as a couple, dressed in what appeared to be paint-ball gear, scurried past them. They carefully ignored Nico and Will, as if trying to pretend that they had not heard them screaming at each other from down the hall.

"Let's just find the vial of my dad," muttered Will.

"Which way should we go?" asked Lou Ellen.

They all peered down the hallway in either direction. On the lower level, the walls had become darker, a combination of stone, dirt, and some moss. The place stunk of mildew. A Lost and Stolen sign pointed to Will's right, while Employee Rooms pointed left.

"I think we should go left," suggested Will. He couldn't explain his reasoning, but he felt that an actual employee room was a safer place for a stolen vial than something marked Lost and Stolen.
Lou Ellen frowned. "But Hermes said the Lotus Eater's would keep it with everything else they've taken."

"Yeah," said Cecil. "And 'Lost and Stolen' sounds pretty promising."

Will had no answer to that. He couldn't explain why he wanted to go left - it was just a feeling he had, and he doubted Cecil or Lou Ellen would consider that an acceptable answer. He was about to attempt an explanation, when Nico solved the problem.

"Why don't you guys take a quick look at the Lost and Stolen, and then catch up to us. If Will feels like this is the way to go, I'm sure there's a reason," Nico looked pointedly at Will like, You'd better not disappoint me, Blondie.

"Okay. We'll be quick," assured Lou Ellen. "Right Cecil? No stealing anything?"

"Oh, yeah. Of course we will."

She raised an eyebrow at his ambiguous response, but said nothing.

"Okay, see you guys in a little bit."

Cecil and Lou Ellen went one way, and Will and Nico went the other. Will glanced behind him briefly, to see their backs before they rounded a corner and were out of sight. Will wasn't entirely sure splitting up was a good idea. He hoped nothing would go wrong. At least Lou Ellen was decent with a knife and her magic, and Nico was fierce even in his weakened condition.

"You shouldn't have shadow traveled us down here," Will told him sternly. "If it bothered you that much, we could have found stairs."

Nico looked at him disbelieving. "You're not still complaining about that are you? I'm fine Solace. Besides, finding stairs would take way too much time."

They turned down another hallway and walked past dozens of wooden, moss-covered doors, brass numbers glinting in the fluorescent lighting.

"It's weird that the staff stay down here, when the rest of the hotel is so nice," said Will. "You'd think they'd stay in the top rooms, with all the cool hot-tubs and stuff."

"Maybe Lotus Eaters like being underground," suggested Nico. "I know I do."

Will had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. Of course the son of Hades liked the underground.

"Maybe we should turn around?" Nico said after another minute of passing the endless doors.

The end of the hallway was in sight, and there was nowhere else to go. Will felt a little depressed at the thought; of course he, as the quest leader, would make the wrong call. This had felt like the right way, like something was calling to him, but none of the doors they had passed seemed right. Nico had probably only been humoring him when he'd agreed to go with Will. Still, Will felt they were going the right way, although everything else would suggest otherwise.

"Just a little further," he muttered.

"But there's nothing down here!" Nico complained.

"There could be..."
"Ever so hopeful, Blondie."

They reached the end of the hallway, stopped, and stared deplorably at the stone wall.

"Well, this has been fun, Solace. Ready to go back?"

Will ignored him, and looked around desperately. He still felt drawn to something around him... although perhaps it was Nico. He stared grumpily at the wall, unwilling to let the son of Hades be proved right.

"Maybe we should knock on it, like in Harry Potter. Do you have a cane?" Will asked.

"Why the Hades would I have a cane?" Nico exclaimed. "Besides I'm pretty sure it was an umbrella."

Will shrugged. "Jason's sword turns into a coin. Percy's turns into a pen. What does yours turn into?"


Will gaped obnoxiously at him. "It turns into shit?" He tried to sound awe-struck.

"Nothing." Nico groaned. "It turns into nothing!"

"Wow. Your sword sucks."

"And you think it's turning into a cane wouldn't suck?"

"I think it'd be pretty nifty right now actually."

"Solace, if my sword turned into a cane," Nico closed his eyes in horror, "I'd fucking get rid of it."

"I think you'd look pretty cool, strutting around with a cane."

Nico stared at him.

"It's alright. I know what you're going to say Nico," Will sighed. "You were born in the nineteen thirties, and that makes you about ninety years old. That's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's okay to admit you need help Death Boy. Canes help ninety-year-olds."

"I don't strut," Nico spat. "And I don't need help walking. And don't call me Death Boy."

"I'm sorry. How about... scuttle? That seems like a more appropriate adjective for you." Will nodded. "Yeah, you'd look good scuttling around with a cane."

"Look Will, a clue!" Nico gasped, pointing straight ahead.

"Really?!" Will squeaked pathetically, and peered at the wall.

Nico rolled his eyes. "No, I just wanted you to stop talking. This was complete waste of time- Where on earth are you going?"

Will had suddenly yanked open the door on the right and ran inside. Nico followed him huffing indignantly.

"Whoa."
The room was enormous. Granite floors, stone walls, towering walls bedecked in flowing, woven tapestries. A flat-screen TV hung on the far side of the room, surrounded by mossy sofas jeweled with little beetles. A tree stump coffee table sat on a Nemean Lion-skin rug. Will felt overwhelmed by the extraneous décor, but he supposed it was a Monster's style. Little wooden cupid-statues were situated around the room, which Nico glared at, like they personally offended him. Everything was arranged immaculately except for one small detail which caught Will's eye.

A shimmering crystal vial gleamed on the end table next to the bed.

Will walked over to it. "Huh. This was easy. They didn't exactly hide it very well."

"I don't think they were expecting to get robbed. Careful," Nico warned as Will moved to grab it. He winced like it was blinding him, but Will had no problem looking at it.

When he picked it up, it glowed brighter for a moment before fading back down. It's contents swirled in a spectrum of gold and white light. Will wanted to gaze at it for hours, but Nico cleared his throat.

"So, what do you think?" he asked. "Is that Apollo's power?"

"Yeah," Will said. "Definitely. I can't explain it, but it feels familiar. This is it." Will pulled his jacket out of his bag and wrapped the vial in it. After carefully placing the bundle back in his pack, he turned to Nico. "Let's go."

"Just a moment," Nico said. "Tell me what really happened in you're dream."

Will cocked his head at him in confusion. "Is this really the place for this discussion? I already told you, all I heard were those voices-"

"Not that one. The one you talked about at the counselor meeting." Will stared at him in horror when he realized what Nico meant.

"What's there to tell?" he stammered. "You heard everything I told Chiron. There's nothing else to say."

Nico narrowed his eyes at him, and Will knew he wasn't buying it. He prayed that Nico wouldn't question him about it. He could imagine his response if he told him the truth - 'You had a dream that you tried to murder me, felt guilty enough to push me away, and then brought me along anyways?' Of course, that would make plenty of sense... Will was beginning to feel like more and more of an idiot. He couldn't hold Nico's gaze for so long and looked down at his hands.

Nico shook his head earnestly. "I don't believe you."

"Yeah well, it's none of your business!" Will muttered. Nico glared at him for a moment and then turned around to leave.

"Fine."

Will grimaced. Everything felt wrong. Nico had trusted him enough to come with him, risk his life for Will's quest. He deserved to know the truth, even if Will was embarrassed to admit it. All of a sudden, Will wondered if he had not made a terrible mistake in not telling Nico immediately about his dream, and he felt ashamed.

"Nico, wait." Will bounded forward and grabbed his hand, forcing him to stop.
His heart pounded. Nico's hand was cold, and small in Will's, but surprisingly soft. He was surprised when Nico didn't pull away instantly.

"You're right. I- I lied to Chiron. There is more to it and I should have told you before I asked you to come. Look, I'll tell you everything right now. If you hate me afterwards, I'll totally get it, but... just know that I never meant to hurt you."

"Okay..." Nico looked a little baffled but nodded.

Will shifted nervously and tried to think of the least awkward way to describe his dream.

"Well, like I said, I was in a hotel room and there were crowds and this really awful slithering sound. Oh and I was by a sofa. Yeah, that's important." Will nodded vigorously.

"Why's that important?" asked Nico.

"Oh, well, because when I turned around again, you were laying on it, and I think you were injured or something, but that ain't nothin' unusual. I mean, you were laying on it! I'm telling you, I was so shocked. I mean one minute you weren't there, and then bam, there you were! It was so surprising, you'd never believe how crazy it-"

"Okay, I get it. You were shocked," Nico interrupted, frowning at him. "Now tell me what happened."

Will gulped.

"Oh, uh, well like I said, I was shocked. And it's not like I can control what I do in my dreams. I mean," Will clarified, "I know you said you can control your dreams, but I can't, so you can't hold this against me. I mean it's not like I wanted to do it- okay, actually I may have kind of wanted to," Will gaped at him in horror. "No wait, I didn't mean that actually. Ignore what ah' just said."

Nico gave him a startled look.

"Okay..."

Will held up a hand. "No, it's alright, I understand. You need to know. It's like with some of my patients, ya know? They don't want ta tell me about their ailments, but sometimes ya'll get to. One time this guy came in and claimed he needed a colonoscopy. Oh no, I think I just violated the patient confidentiality-thing. Now I'm not sayin' it was no son of Poseidon or nothin'. Oh God's!"

Will clapped his hands over his face. "I'm so sorry! Sometimes ah' revert back into my Texan drawl, when ah' get nervous."

Will peeked through his fingers to see Nico's face, which was perfectly composed into an expression of wtf...?

Will blushed and forced himself to talk normally. "It took me so long to get rid of that too..." He murmured to himself.

"For the love of God's Solace, just tell me!"

Will flinched and forced himself to spit out the rest.

"... and then I climbed on top of you, and stoked your hair, and you told me to come, and then I smothered you with a pillow. I think I killed you!" he squeaked.
Nico gaped at him, and Will clapped his hands over his face in shame.

"Say something," he pleaded. "Do you hate me?"

He heard a snort and looked up in surprise. Nico bit his lip, looking like he was trying hard not to laugh.

"I told you to come?" Nico choked out sheepishly.

"That's what you took from that!?" Will screamed. "You died. I killed you. At least I think so. I didn't get to see the ending-"

Nico held up a hand.

"Hang on. I told you to 'come'?"

"Yes."

"I feel like you probably misheard me..." Nico snorted. "I would never say such a thing!"

"Oh no. You were very adamant about it," Will told him firmly.

"Your coming?" Nico raised an eyebrow.

Something seemed off to Will, like they weren't on the same page. He didn't understand why Nico was fixating on what he'd said, or why he seemed to think it was hilarious. Then a thought struck him.

"Wait, Nico..."

Nico held up a hand. "Let me get this straight." He cleared his throat. "You climbed on top of me, I told you to come, and you were then so offended that you tried to suffocate me?"

Will swallowed.

"Nico, when I say 'come', I mean come come, like 'come to a place', not like..." Will made something akin to an exploding gesture with his hands.

Nico blinked at him.

"Oh. I see. That makes more sense."

Will couldn't help it; he burst out laughing at him. It was official; Nico was the most ridiculous person he had ever met. Will risked a glance at his face and discovered his earlier hypothesis was incorrect; Nico was not too pale to blush. His face was a worrisome shade of magenta. It made Will laugh even harder.

"Dear Gods Nico, and I thought I was embarrassing," he chortled.

"You are embarrassing," Nico snapped. "Your the one who can't describe a dream without slipping into a wacky accent. With explainative skills like that, it's no wonder you're a terrible doctor!"

"Oh please," Will managed, gasping for breath. "I'll have you know that I'm the best healer there is, and that my 'explainative skills' are exemplary. It's you that needs to get your mind out of the gutter."
"It's far too late for that," said Nico.

Will heard a soft chuckle and looked at Nico in surprise. Nico was still flushing scarlet, but was now looking at him with a peculiar expression, mainly amused.

"Wow. Talk about a twist ending," he muttered, shaking his head.

"What?" Will asked blankly. This was not the reaction he'd been expecting.

"Only you Blondie..." Nico finally doubled over, laughing at Will. "You killed me?!"

Whereas Nico had started laughing, now Will stopped to glare at him. "It's not funny Nico. Chiron thought it would come to pass. What if I do kill you?"

Nico saw Will's frustrated expression and laughed even harder.

"I always expected to die in a weird way, but this? Being killed by a son of Apollo with a pillow, Oh God's the shame."

"Shut up." Will grumbled. Nico clearly wasn't taking the vision as seriously as he had. "Aren't you even a little bit worried?"

"Will," Nico managed, "do you want to kill me?"

Will flinched. "Of course not-!"

Nico rolled his eyes.

"Exactly. So you were probably right the first time. You just had a really weird dream."

"You're unbelievable, Nico," Will said. A small sliver of doubt remained in him, but the weight on his chest had lightened measurably.

"Come on. We should get going," Nico snickered at him.

"Fine."

Halfway out of the room, Nico chuckled again. "I never knew you had a Texan Drawl."

"Shut up!" Will shouted. "I can't help it, it's a nervous tic-"

"Come on, Blondie," Nico interrupted his rambling. "Let's go find Lou and Cecil."

With that, Nico grabbed Will's arm and led the way into the hall. Will couldn't help but grin in amazement as he was dragged out of the room. He was relieved Nico wasn't mad at him or freaked out. He didn't even seem upset that Will had lied to him and withheld the news of his possible death... Although the knowledge that Nico thought his death was a source of hilarity had Will concerned.

He made a note to run some tests on his mental health later.

They didn't run into Lou Ellen and Cecil in the hallways, and they made their way all the way back to the Lost and Stolen room.

"I wonder why they're taking so long?" Will wondered aloud. "They were supposed to meet up with us."
"Cecil's probably trying to cram everything into his backpack," said Nico.

He said it as a joke, but Will wouldn't have been surprised if it were true. When they reached the door to the Lost and Stolen room it was shut, but Will could hear raised voices inside.

"You know what lady? I demand to speak to your manager-!" Lou Ellen's voice rang out from behind the closed door.

Nico and Will shared another look, before Will pushed open the door.

"Hey, what are you guys-"

Will saw Lou Ellen and Cecil briefly, sitting on the floor, before noticing the flock of birds in the room.

"Will no!" Lou Ellen shrieked.

Then she was hidden from sight as the birds descended.

Lou Ellen

Being tied up in a basement, by an angry receptionist was not what Lou Ellen had intended when she'd left with Cecil. They had entered the room, and had a brief moment to gaze at a bizarre assortment of items before a hideous screech caused them to spin around. A ruffled-looking bird stood in the corner, squawking fiercely at them. Seconds later, a horrible pain exploded in the back of her head and the ground rose up to meet her.

The next thing she knew, she was tied back-to-back with Cecil, thick ropes biting into her arms and ankles. She struggled desperately against them but they held tight. A glance to her waist told her she'd been disarmed. She peered blearily around the room until she saw her knife and mirror propped against the far corner. Cecil's sword was there as well.

Two clawed feet stepped into her view.

Lou Ellen looked up dizzily to see Agnete standing above her, surrounded by an angry flock of what she thought were Dodo birds. Her blonde hair was as flawless as ever, but her expression was stormy. Lou Ellen couldn't be sure, but most of the birds seemed to be staring at her with hungry looks in their beady red eyes.

"Hello Sweetie." Agnete flicked Lou Ellen on the nose. "I knew you and your nasty little friends were up to something."

"What are you doing?" Lou Ellen groaned.

Agnete smirked at her.

"I'm using you as bait, obviously. I need to speak to your other friend, that son of Apollo."

"Why?" she asked.

"That's really none of your concern," said Agnete. "You'd best hope that he has use for you, or else I am going to feed you to my precious birds."

Lou Ellen scowled at her. "You know what lady? I demand to speak to your manager! If you don't untie me right this second, so help me I will-"
A hideous chorus of cawing overpowered her own yelling. She and Agnete looked towards the door in time to see Will and Nico entering the room.

"Will no!" Lou Ellen screamed, but it was too late. The birds dove at the two demi-god's pecking and screeching. Nico grabbed his sword, and swung wildly into the air. Tufts of bird fluff and gold dust exploded everywhere. Agnete shouted something sharply and the birds retreated. Nico and Will stood, scratched and bleeding, and covered in feathers.

Agnete beamed like nothing had happened.

"Hello again sweetheart," Agnete said to Will. "It's wonderful to see you again, although I can't say the same for your friends here. We have much to talk about."

"What do you want with Will?" Nico snapped at her, still gripping his sword in his hand.

Agnete smiled. "It's very sweet that you care so much about your friend, son of Hades, but you don't need to worry. I have no intention of feeding him to my birds."

"How come Will doesn't get to be fed to the birds?" Cecil asked grumpily. Lou Ellen breathed out in relief to hear that the son of Hermes was conscious.

"Ah, let's see," Agnete pointed at Lou Ellen. "You smell funny and that makes me uncomfortable, you are a thief and would steal everything in this room if I let you, and you," she pointed at Nico, "just generally creep me out."

"I smell funny?" Lou Ellen gasped, outraged.

"I told you not to where that weird cooking oil!" Cecil choked at her.

"It's pine tree bark essential oil. Get it right!" Lou Ellen exclaimed furiously. "It's all natural and organic."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Agnete. "Dodo birds love pine tree bark- it's like catnip to them!"

The dodo birds cawed in agreement, their red eyes glinting maliciously.

"Oh splendid," Lou Ellen muttered.

"But you," Agnete turned back to Will, "sweetheart, are very special to my bosses. They have big plans for you indeed."

"Who are your bosses?" asked Nico.

"If I told you, it would spoil the surprise Creepster," Agnete simpered.

"I hate surprises," said Nico. "Who are they? And don't call me creepster."

"Oh yes, that reminds me," said Agnete. She snapped her fingers and then held out her palm to Will. A small blood-red flower lay in the center of her hand, petal uncurling.

"Take it," she ordered Will.

"What is it?" Will asked, glaring at the suspicious flora.

Agnete giggled. "Why, it's a poppy flower, silly. It's your invitation to the festivities, so don't lose it."
"What festivities?" asked Lou Ellen.

Agnete glared at her. "It hardly matters dear. You won't be alive to see them."

"You mean you won't," Will snarled with all the ferocity of a puppy.

"Sweetheart, don't make me sic my dodos on you again," Agnete snapped at Will. "As delightful as that would be, this really is the last flock in existence. They're such misunderstood creatures." She tried to scratch one of the birds beaks but it snapped at her finger, and let out an awful hissing sound. Agnete scrunched her nose and retracted her hand.

"You don't know anything about us. What makes you think we want an invitation to- to- whatever this is," said Will, and Agnete laughed.

"Actually, I think you'll find I know more than any of you. Like your quest, for starters. I know where this will take you in the end. I don't need any dreams or prophecies for that."

"You know about our quest?" Will asked, shocked. "Do you know where Apollo is?"

Agnete's eyes shifted downwards for the briefest of seconds. "Of course I don't know where Lord Apollo is. I just have friends in high places. That's how I know about your quest. But I like Apollo, you know, I really do. It's why I'm giving you this flower, you'll need it for your quest. Just ask Creepster here- he knows what it means."

Everyone looked at Nico.

"What is she talking about Nico?" Will asked him.

Nico shook his head at Will, in clear bewilderment. "I have no idea," he stammered. "She's just making stuff up, trying to save herself. That's not going to work." Nico took a step forward, but Will grabbed his arm.

"Good grief," Agnete sighed to herself. "Demigod's really are hopelessly pathetic these days aren't they? If you would stop and think for even a moment, you'd know exactly where to go next. I'll give you a hint; the flower is a clue."

Agnete winked at him.

Nico stared at her blankly, and Agnete looked disappointed.

"Now, I wish I could help you more, but I am a business woman. Don't disappoint me. And don't keep them waiting. They're very big on deadlines, let me tell you."

"Keep who waiting?" asked Cecil. Lou Ellen felt him struggling with the ropes behind her. "Tell us where Apollo is!"

Agnete looked at him sympathetically. "I would love to dear, but my bosses have other plans. Now, I must be off -"

"Wait, that's it?" said Nico. "You're just going to leave and let us go?"

Agnete frowned. "Would you prefer to be fed to my birds? That's certainly arrangeable."

"That's okay," Will said hastily. "But why are you helping us?"

Agnete's expression darkened. "Oh don't mistake this for help sweetie. I'm just doing my job."
"Your job," Nico stated. "You run this hotel, don't you?"

"I do," Agnete said slowly.

"So that means Apollo worked for you for a little while, didn't he? I was thinking it was strange of Zeus to send Apollo somewhere without his powers, somewhere that could potentially be dangerous for him. Zeus is mad at him, but I don't think he wants his son dead… which means Zeus must have had someone keeping an eye on him down here, just in case," Nico broke off, clearly thinking hard. His eyes were narrowed when he looked at Agnete again. "Is that it? Apollo went missing under your watch and now you're trying to fix it before Zeus decides to believe Hermes, and no longer thinks Apollo is just playing games? The bosses you're talking about- you mean the God's don't you?"

"You're wrong," Agnete said tersely. Lou Ellen couldn't help but notice how tense she had become as Nico had spoken.

"Is he? You're clearly trying to help us," Lou Ellen said, watching Agnete critically. "What I don't get, is why you attacked us first. It's kind of a mixed signal, you know."

Agnete laughed, not her usual wind chime giggle, but a bitter replica.

"You think you're so smart, don't you? So clever." Agnete flicked her blonde ponytail over her shoulder and folded her arms. "Those are some good speculations, I'll admit, but ridiculous. I've offered you help, now I suggest you accept it."

She held out the red flower again.

Will eyed it for a moment before stepping out and taking it from her hand.

Agnete looked pleas-es. She pursed her lips, eyeing the son of Apollo, and then shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"Great!" Agnete's bubbly persona was back now. "I have places to be and people to see," she winked at Will, like she thought it was an inside joke, "Oh, and uh..." She gave an apologetic chuckle. "I'm sorry about this."

Agnete snapped her finger's again. Lou Ellen had the briefest moment to wonder what the movement was supposed to do before the dodo birds screeched and descended on them. While Will and Nico shouted and began fighting away birds, Lou Ellen caught a flash of Agnete slipping past them, through the doorway.

"Guys get us out of these ropes!" Lou Ellen screamed as a dodo bird launched itself at her. Somehow she managed to raise her foot and kick it away. Nico ducked under outstretched claws and ran towards her, but a huge fluffy dodo bird waddled into his path and hissed at him.

"That's not natural," Cecil yelped. He had been messing with the ropes for a while, and at last managed to free one of his wrists from behind him.

"No kidding!" Lou Ellen shouted.

While Nico moved to meet the bird in battle, another one came over to Lou Ellen and nipped at her arm. And here I thought it would be nice to smell like a delicious pine tree. She thought regretfully. I'll think I'll stick to Vanilla from now on.

The birds looked at her evilly. Lou Ellen gulped. "Good birdies. Please don't eat me..."
A knife skittered next to her on the floor. She knocked it towards Cecil, who grabbed it with his free hand and began slicing at the ropes. Lou Ellen could see Will in the corner, grabbing hers' and Cecil's weapons and bags.

"Will!" Lou Ellen screamed, "Help Nico!"

Will followed her line of sight, to where Nico appeared to be surrounded by a hurricane of giant angry birds.

"Why are there so many?" Nico snarled, swinging his sword at a particularly juicy one. "People call this extinct?"

Lou Ellen felt the ropes loosen and fall away. She and Cecil jumped up and ran to grab their weapons from Will dodging, kicking and whacking birds away as best they could. Lou Ellen felt a pair of talons cut her hand.

Will was still grabbing their belongings while swatting away birds.

Lou Ellen turned towards the center of the room.

"Here birdies!" she called, raising her arms. Hopefully she could keep them busy long enough for the others to get organized. "Come get dinner!" Most of the birds seemed to hear her and turned to look.

"Uh, Lou...?!" Cecil yelled. He turned to Nico. "Can you get us out of here?"

"No problem," Nico shouted, while at the same time Will screamed "NO!" from across the room.

"Will," Nico yelled, hacking his sword at a dodo bird. "We are all going to get eaten unless we get out of here!"

"Fine, let's get to the elevator."

"For the love of God's, Solace, how weak do you think I am?" Nico yelled at him.

"Um, guys..." Cecil muttered.

"You got poisoned yesterday di Angelo!" Will shrieked. "If you shadow travel one more time I swear to Gods I will-"

"You don't control me!" Nico screamed. "Why can't you ever respect my decisions, you pig-headed, smart-mouthed, annoying-"


The three of them looked around to see Lou Ellen sitting in the center of the room in a mound of furry dodo birds. They nibbled at her shirt and squawked happily. A couple of them waddled in circles and flopped over, squeaking. One of them perched regally on her head.

Apparently they liked their new, living pine tree.

It's like catnip to them, Agnete had said.

Lou Ellen watched as one of them hopped onto her lap, curled up, and went to sleep.

"Oh," Will muttered. "Well, this works I guess."

"Some dodo birds just tried to make me their bitch and you guys are making fun of me?" Lou Ellen shrieked at them. Will and Cecil doubled over laughing and even Nico cracked a smile at her.

"I have the worst friends ever. I should have let you get eaten," she grumbled.

After everything had settled down, and they had extradited the daughter of Hecate from the bird pile, the four of them made their way to the elevator. Will even managed to coax Nico onto it, though he stood rigidly by the door the entire time. When another woman stepped in however, Nico disappeared into thin air, leaving them behind to Will's horror. He wasn't sure what the mortal woman had seen through the mist when Nico disappeared but she gaped open-mouthed at the spot from which he had vanished for the duration of the ride.

Now, the four of them stood on the pavement outside the Lotus Hotel and Casino.

"Excuse me," Will asked a random man passing by, "What's the date?"

The man looked taken aback, but told him.

"One day," Will muttered. "We were in there for an hour, max, and a whole day passed…"

"Could have been a lot worse," said Nico. "And we got what we needed. We got the vial."

"Yeah, definitely could have been worse," said Cecil. "So, do we have any idea where we go from here?"

"Yes."

Will, Cecil, and Lou Ellen looked at Nico in surprise.

"We do?" asked Will.

Nico nodded. "I think so. I'm not certain, but Agnete did say the flower was a clue. That and what Will described in the message from his dream."

"So you know what it means?" Will asked Nico.

"I think I know who's sending you these dreams, Will, but getting to them will be difficult," Nico said.

"Where do we need to go?" Will asked.

The son of Hades smiled at him, dark eyes glinting.

"The Underworld."
Note: My version of the Underworld is a little different than it is described in the books. I have always imagined Elysium like a sort of heaven- extending endlessly, full of whatever it's inhabitants want it to be full of. That is how I have written it. Rhadamanthus is actually the Ruler of Elysium, however the Labyrinth of Dreams which is mentioned, is something I created myself for the plot.

*I don't own anything PJO or HoO! That epicness all belongs to Rick Riordan!

Chapter Six:

Into Elysium

"I thought you said if I ever went to the Underworld your father would vaporize me," Will stated, setting down his magazine. "Sorry for asking, but isn't that a little counterproductive?"

Nico frowned at Will from across the table. The two of them were sitting at a wooden picnic table in the middle of a large forested park, a few streets down from the Lotus Hotel and Casino. After a half-night of sleep and the Battle of the Dodo Birds, they were exhausted, hungry, and baptized in bird feathers. Cecil and Lou Ellen had wandered across the street to get take-out for the four of them from a small diner. Nico and Will wandered into the park and claimed an old picnic table next to a cluster of purple hydrangeas. Will then proceeded to rifle through his bag and emerged a second later with some sort of mortal magazine, which he promptly flicked open and began squinting at.

"He would if he knew you were there," Nico said. "We won't be getting anywhere near his palace though. Our best bet is to stay on the outskirts, out of his line of sight." Nico grimaced and picked at chipped part of the wood table.

"I don't like this," Will told him. "I don't want you putting yourself at risk just so we can get down there."

Nico sighed. "I already told you Will. There's no risk to me. I'm the son of Hades; the source of all my power comes from the Underworld. It'll be easy for me to shadow travel the four of us down there, and it's faster than trying to get to one of the manual entrances. It'll be even easier if we wait until it gets darker out."

"I still can't believe you can just shadow travel in and out of the Underworld," Will said, flipping to another page of his magazine. "Doesn't your dad mind you zipping in and out whenever you please?"

Nico shrugged. "Not really. Half the time he never even knows I'm there. He's too busy, and I'm pretty sure he does everything in his power to avoid me. Other than that, he knows it's the only place I feel safe, so he allows it."

Will didn't look amused. "The only place?" he questioned challengingly, narrowing his eyes at
Nico glared back, but relented. "One of the places," he corrected himself. Will looked pleased by his answer, but it only lasted a second. The son of Apollo chewed his lip and frowned. Nico suddenly wondered if it wasn't just him he was worried about.

"I won't let anything happen to you Will," he said softly. "Or Lou and Cecil. I know my way around the Underworld. I'll keep you safe. I wouldn't risk your guys' lives if I thought I couldn't handle it."

"I know that." Will glared at Nico like he was deliberately missing the point. "I just don't want you needlessly exhausting yourself."

"I won't," Nico told him. "I promise."

Silence fell between them for a minute. Nico found himself watching Will as he flipped slowly through his magazine. The front cover was an obscene shade of pink that matched his shoes. Nico smirked to himself. Why Will had decided to wear his pink crocs on a quest was beyond him. They didn't seem very practical, but Nico figured that if anything could scare monsters away, they would certainly do the job. At least he'd abandoned his strange Alice in Wonderland shirt. Instead he was wearing his usual light blue and yellow flannel shirt and blue jeans. It was a look Nico found he could appreciate. It brought out his eyes.

"Can you imagine living like a mortal?" Will asked suddenly, looking towards the row of townhouses that lined the street. "In an apartment, with a job and everything?"

Nico snorted loudly.

"Definitely not," he scoffed. "Nor do I want to. It sounds awful; being tied down, having obligations. I stayed at Camp for two weeks and I already felt like I was going crazy, staying still for so long. I'd never be able to live like that."

"Oh."

Will's face fell and he played with one of the cracks in the table. Was it Nico's imagination or did he almost seem disappointed by his answer?

"Honestly, I've never really thought about it," Nico told him. "Up until a month ago, my only goal in life has been to stay alive."

Will looked up curiously. "'Up until a month ago?' What's your new one?"

Nico hesitated. He'd talked without thinking and he mentally chided himself. Somehow, he continually found himself saying more than he meant to around Will. He realized Blondie was still waiting for an answer, and he grudgingly told him.

"To be happy, I suppose."

He was aware of Will looking at him and he bit his lip, wondering if he'd said too much. He felt a little embarrassed by it, but it was the truth. Everyone else made it look so easy to attain, but so far in his life Nico had found the task extraordinarily difficult.

"So how's it going so far?" Will asked softly.

Nico shrugged.
"It's going."

Will didn't offer a response, and merely frowned at him.

Nico squirmed self-consciously and cast his thoughts around, searching for something else to say. He chanced a look back at Will and felt the same sensation he had felt several times before. It was a feeling he was growing accustomed to whenever he was around the son of Apollo, like a thrum of butterflies were racing against the beat of his heart.

He had yet to decide if he liked it or not.

When he had first felt it around Will, it took some time before he understood what it was. It was similar to what he felt when he first layed eyes on Percy Jackson. A sort of painful longing. With Percy however, the feeling had changed as the years passed. What began as hopeful excitement, the promise of adventure and heroism to come, fell way into bitterness and left him with an ache in his chest and resentment bottling up. It wasn't Percy's fault, Nico knew that. Annabeth, Percy's father, his quests, his lack of interest in Nico, the emotional remnants of Bianca... eventually it all just added up.

The mismatched ingredients in a chemistry experiment gone tragically wrong.

Nico wasn't certain, but this time something felt different. He looked into Will's eyes, watching their crisp blue that was speckled with flecks of molten gold, like the sun itself was fighting to shine through somewhere beyond them. It burned, too, and though dazzled by their light, he had to look away.

Instead his gaze fell on the pink magazine and he motioned towards it.

"Why are you reading that?" Nico asked. He couldn't understand how anything in a mortal magazine could possibly be interesting to a demigod. Then again, Will Solace was proving himself to be remarkably odd and he didn't think anything could surprise him at this point.

Will hesitated before he answered.

"I'm trying to read it," he said slowly.

Nico rolled his eyes. "Yes, I figured. But why?"

"I want to be a doctor."

"Okay. And I suppose..." Nico squinted at the title of the magazine, "...Cosmopolitan will help you with that?"

Will smiled. "Probably not, but you never know," he joked. He fiddled with one of the dog-eared pages. "I always try to practice reading mortal stuff. You know, not ancient Greek. I feel like dyslexia is a constant battle against what I do. I want to get past that, so I can get into medical school."

"New Rome has a college, you know," Nico said. "And a medical school. Most stuff there is in Latin, but it's not hard to pick up, and it's easier than trying to read English through a headache. If you want, I'll take you there when this is over."

Nico's heart hammered at the offer. It wasn't like he was asking Will out, but it was the first time he'd ever suggested they do something together, just the two of them. We have to live through this first though, Nico told himself. He didn't say that aloud though.
"That'd be great," Will said. He smiled slightly at Nico, but it looked almost forced.

Nico was surprised. He had been expecting nothing less than groundbreaking enthusiasm and excitement from Will. Blondie was always getting misty-eyed and passionate when he started talking about medicine and healing. During his stay in the infirmary, Nico had been forced to listen to multiple lectures about Ancient Mayan Medicinal Herb treatments.

"You don't want to go to New Rome," Nico realized with a start.

"No, I do!" Will exclaimed. "That's the problem."

"You're not making any sense Blondie."

"I want to go to New Rome," Will said, "it's just... sometimes I feel like I shouldn't."

"Why not?" Nico was at a loss for understanding.

Will shrugged. "I don't know… It started after the battle of Manhattan, when I was made leader of the Apollo cabin. I decided to check out the collateral damage our battle caused the mortals, and... it was really bad, you know? I know we're fighting to protect mortals as well as ourselves, but if I can help them with my powers, shouldn't I?"

Will lay his head down on his arms, seemingly frustrated. "I'm a son of Apollo, a healer. If I'm supposed to be so good at healing people, shouldn't I try to help mortals as well? What makes demigods so special? We fight our wars to protect ourselves and mortals, but its not just us who get hurt during them..." Will trailed off hesitantly.

Nico stared at him stunned.

"You can't save everyone," he said quietly, "though you try. If it weren't for you, and all of the other healers, there wouldn't be enough of us left to even fight for mortals. We're all doing the best we can. If you want to go to New Rome, you should. You'll be able to do your best work, in a place where you feel most comfortable. Just focus on taking care of yourself."

Will looked up and raised an eyebrow. "That's sound advice di Angelo. I'll follow it as soon as you do."


Will smiled. "I wish I could hug you."

"Wow. Way to kill the moment Solace," Nico grumbled. The thought of Will's arms around him… Nico wasn't sure how he felt about that. "Besides," he added hurriedly, "Lou and Cecil are back."

He pointed and Will turned to see their friends returning, carrying plastic bags.

"What up, dudes?" Lou Ellen said when they reached them.

Lou Ellen sat next to Will and pulled out burgers and fries. Cecil sat next to Nico. Nico was surprised that he was willing to sit so close to him, and he had to resist the urge to scoot away from the son of Hermes.

It also didn't help that Nico thought Cecil looked a little like his older brother, Luke.

Cecil was almost as tall, and had the same sandy blonde hair. He was missing Luke's scar, of course, and his eyes were light brown. Cecil was also half as muscular and twice as mischievous.
"Would someone please explain why we must go to the Underworld again?" asked Lou Ellen, scrutinizing her burger distastefully. "What does this flower have to do with it?"

"The flower is a poppy," Nico told her slowly, watching as she dissected her burger. "It's the symbol of the Oneiroi."

"Right," Will said. He frowned thoughtfully as he took a bite. "They're those guys, who have those poppies, who live in that place in the Underworld... Yeah, nope. I've got no idea who they are."

"The Oneiroi are three sons of Nyx. Morpheus, Phobetor, and Phantasos," Nico informed him. "I know you remember Morpheus. He's the one who put all of Manhattan to sleep. Together, the three of them create and control all dreams."

"Oh thank Gods," Cecil exclaimed, "based on my previous experiences with dreams, they must have some weird fetishes."

Lou Ellen wrinkled her nose at him. "What on earth do you dream about Cecil?"

Cecil looked at her, blushed, and refused to answer.

"That's not really how it works," Nico muttered, "but nice to know."

"You think they're the ones who are giving me these dreams?" Will asked him. He had already eaten all of his french fries and was now eyeing Nico's. Nico clutched them closer to himself.

"They have to be," he stated. "No one else has that kind of power, except for Hypnos, but Clovis hasn't noticed anything suspicious going on with him. It doesn't really seem like his style anyways, and the flower pretty much confirms everything."

"Agnete said it was an invitation from her bosses," said Lou Ellen. "But I thought we established her bosses were the Gods..."

"I'm not sure what she meant," Nico admitted. "I got the impression she didn't want Zeus to find out about his son going missing right under her nose. It makes sense then that she'd want to help us with our quest. What I don't understand is how she knows the Oneiroi are involved in his disappearance. Whoever kidnapped Apollo was powerful enough to do it without Zeus finding out, so how could someone like Agnete find out as much as she made it seem like she knew. Don't get me wrong, Agnete seems like a piece of work but we've dealt with more powerful things than her."

"But none of that explains why she said the flower was an invite from her bosses," said Cecil.

"You don't think Agnete is some sort of double agent, do you?" asked Will.

Nico shook his head. "I don't know."

He looked up at the sky, which was setting a gentle gold and orange. "It's nearly sundown," he announced. "We should get going if our plan is going to work."

"I still don't like our plan," Will muttered, grabbing a handful of fries from Nico's plate.

"Uh, excuse me-," Nico gasped, "what do you think you're doing?"

Will froze, reminding Nico of a deer in headlights.

"It didn't look like you were going to eat them, so I-"
"You thought you'd help yourself?" Nico raised his eyebrows. "No asking first? No 'please'? No 'thank you'?"

Will rolled his eyes.

"Sorry. Can I please have some fries?"

"No. Give them back."

Will stuffed the fries into his mouth in rebellion. "Cerm ernd gert em." He winked at Nico.

Nico stared at him in disbelief. His eyes dropped briefly to Will's mouth, which now had his French fries dangling out of it and decided it was conclusive proof that Blondie could make him feel things he'd never felt before. He didn't think he'd ever been so revolted and turned-on at the same time.

"Actually I'm good," Nico muttered

Will actually looked a little disappointed.

Nico wondered about Will sometimes.

Occasionally Will would make off-handed remarks, or even little looks that made Nico wonder if Will might be… well, like Nico. Will certainly gave him more checkups than Nico thought was necessary. (Okay, so he had given him a checkup every day since he first arrived at camp, but Will had said that was normal. Nico certainly hadn't thought so, but he had reasoned Will was just very dedicated to his work. Now, however, he was beginning to wonder if it was something more. Normally Nico found Will easy to read, but he wasn't certain about this. It seemed a little too much to hope for...

Nico pushed the thought away along with the rest of his food, and stood up.

"Alright. Enough delay," he said. "You guys ready to do this?"

The other three stood up, taking a moment to throw their trash into a nearby garbage can.

"How does shadow travel work?" Lou Ellen asked curiously. "If we go so fast, how come it doesn't kill us or tear us to pieces like a tornado?"

"Technically, you're not really solid when it happens," said Nico. "You sort of 'become' part of the shadows for a few seconds, and then you reform again."

"Like the transporters in Star Trek!" Will exclaimed excitedly. "In order to be recreated in a different place, first you must be destroyed."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but that sounds terrifying," Nico muttered. "So I'm going to say... No. You're wrong. It's nothing like that. Stop talking Blondie, you lost your speaking privileges."

"I've lost my speaking privileges?" Will asked in disbelief.

"Yes. Shut up."

"You shut up!"

"Don't tell me-"
"Guys!" Cecil cried. "I'd like to do this before hell freezes over."

"I assure you, that's highly unlikely," Nico told him.

"Well," said Lou Ellen, "I'm sure it'll be a blast. Let's get going."

The four of them grabbed hands, and dissolved into the dark.

They snapped back into existence at the base of a stone cliff, right on the border of Elysium.

A ground of finely crushed obsidian shimmered and crunched under their feet. Gold and black poplar trees sprung from between the grains, swaying softly in the cavernous breeze. Above them a star-studded night sky gleamed and flickered in spectral light.

It was the Underworld: Cool, Creepy, and Cave-like. Just like the travel brochure said. While Will and Cecil staggered and looked green from the experience, Lou Ellen twirled around looking awed.

"Whoa," she murmured, "I've always wondered what the Underworld looked like. It's beautiful, just how I imagined. I love it."

Nico frowned at her. The more he got to know the daughter of Hecate, the more concerned he became for her sanity.

"Of course you do," said Cecil. "You're a daughter of Hecate. You're into all things dark, weird, and witchy."

"That's true," Lou Ellen smiled at him and he blushed. "You know, I've heard there are some very rare toadstools down here... I think they only grow in the fields of punishment..." She looked hopefully at Nico, like he would escort her there.

"Yeah um, Lou, let's try to avoid collecting toadstools," Nico muttered.

"I just hope we don't die down here," Cecil said. "I've always imagined I'd die heroically, you know, robbing a convenience store or something." Okay, so Nico was concerned for his sanity too.

"As wondrous as that sounds," said Will, "I would like to see the sun again before I croak, so let's get a move on."

Will seemed the most uneasy out of the four of them, Nico noticed, as they walked along the base of the cliff. His eyes flickered around nervously, like he expected Hades to pop up out of nowhere with his flaming blue hair and reap their souls.

It made sense to Nico. Will spent every possible moment of his life outside, bathing in the glow of the sun (or as Nico called it, baking). The Underworld was his polar opposite, and by extension, Nico. The idea made Nico a little sad.

"Are you okay, Will?" he asked worriedly, watching as the son of Apollo jumped when some pebbles tumbled from the cliff.

"It's dark in here," Will croaked.

"I thought you said you could kind of see in the dark because you're a son of Apollo?" Nico asked.

Will glared at him, blue eyes dampened in the dim light. "I can. But yes, I'm the son of the sun god. I can see in the dark, and yet I sleep with a nightlight."
"Don't worry," Nico told him. "It won't be like this for long. Not where we're going."

Nico picked up speed for Will's sake. Something was putting him on edge. He had been this way before, but there was a certain oppressiveness this time, like someone was breathing down his neck. To their left a rust-colored creek trickled, which Nico was careful to drag Will away from when he moved too close to it.

"Don't go near the creek."

"Why not?" Will asked, frowning at him.

"There could be some runoff from the other rivers, like the Styx or the Lethe. But mainly, it's the Nymphs you have to worry about."

"There are nymphs in the Underworld?" Cecil asked behind him.

"Ash nymphs," Nico said shortly. "They live in the mud banks, and they're not friendly. I'd prefer not to have a run-in with them, so stay back."

Will glanced at the stream in horror, probably disappointed that the only thing resembling the upper world in the slightest was also dangerous. Nico sincerely hoped he didn't ask why the stream was-

"Why is the stream red?"

"Oh, uh..." Nico wondered if he should lie. "Well, it drains from the fields of punishment..." He winced regretfully as Will stared at him in open horror.

Nico poured on the speed.

"I can see why you like it here Nico," Lou Ellen said brightly. "It's just all sorts of cheerful goodness- Hey! Did you see that?!" she gasped suddenly pointing into the trees.

Nico had. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the glimpse of a woman wearing what looked like a white cotton dress, but as soon as he peered closer, she slipped behind a tree and was lost from sight.

He turned to Lou Ellen. "Do you think you can wrap some mist around us, just to be safe? I doubt anyone will want to bother us since I'm with you, but it would lessen our chances of being discovered."

"Yeah, no problem," she said shakily.

"So where are we going exactly?" asked Will.

As if in answer, at that moment the golden trees ended abruptly, and sunlight blasted down on them. Before them lay a large valley, rippling golden wheat-grass shimmering in the sunshine over the dunes. In the center of the valley a great lake shimmered like a mirage under the sun beams. And in the middle of the lake was-


Nico turned to his companions, the three of whom were gazing awestruck at the vast heartlands of Elysium.

"We're going to see King Rhadamanthus," he said. "The Guardian of Elysium. He might be able to
They made their way slowly towards the lake, Nico in the lead.

"Do you think we'll run into-" Will stopped suddenly and clamped his mouth shut. It took him a moment but Nico understood what he'd been about to ask.

"I don't think so," he said gently. A lot of campers had died over the years, people who were friends, family even. He could understand that Will wanted to know if he should be prepared to see them again. "We're not actually going into Elysium. We're just going up to the entrance."


"They're all here," Nico confirmed.

Will gazed out over the fields and then blinked hard, like he'd been struck with a thought. He looked hopefully at Nico. "What about Michael Yew?"

Nico wished he had a better answer to give him. "I'm sorry, Will," he murmured. "I don't know where Michael is."

Will looked away, clearly troubled. "What about… Leo?"

Nico's throat clenched. "No. Leo is… missing. I asked my dad about him, but… he never saw him. I don't know what happened to him."

They continued onwards, following the path down towards the water.

The lake was a glassy cerulean blue, slow ripples gliding across the surface. A great, long dock stretched out atop the waters, a small canoe tied to one of the dock-legs. At the end of the dock sat a boy, legs kicked over the side, bare feet brushing the waters below. He appeared to be writing in a journal.

The boy noticed the four demigods almost instantly as they approached. Dark, curly dark hair cascaded over his eyes, which were a deep gold. The kid may have looked about ten, but his ancient eyes betrayed his apparent youth. Any demigod worth their salt would know instantly that he was an immortal being. The boy wore a white cotton shirt and shorts.

Despite the sun, his skin was pale and spectral; he was a ghost.


"Hello again, Nico," the boy said warmly. His eyes drifted to the three accompanying demigods.

"Rhadamanthus, this is Cecil, son of Hermes, Lou Ellen, daughter of Hecate, and Will Solace, Son of Apollo." Nico turned to look at his friends. "Guys, this is King Rhadamanthus, Gatekeeper of Elysium."

Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil murmured their greetings, but looked taken aback. Nico wasn't sure what they had been expecting, but he doubted it was a boy a few years younger than them. Nico himself had been surprised when he'd first met the King of Elysium.

He'd been expecting Gandalf.

"Why have you come here, Nico di Angelo?" Rhadamanthus asked. "And more importantly, why have you brought your friends into the Underworld?" He nodded towards Will, Lou Ellen, and
Cecil. "You know they're not dead yet, right?"

Nico almost smiled. "I'm aware. We're on a quest right now, and we were hoping you might be able to help us."

"Indeed?" Rhadamanthus looked surprised. "What sort of quest?"

Nico looked to Will, allowing the son of Apollo to explain their situation. Will looked a little worn-out, being asked yet again to explain what was going on, but did so. Rhadamanthus remained silent for the most part, but when Will reached the part about Apollo getting banished he shook his head, looking sad.

"The fates truly work in mysterious ways don't they?" he said. "You say Apollo is exiled by his own family?"

"Not all of them," Will said quickly. "But... yeah."

"Hmm. Seems we're all in the same boat then." Rhadamanthus shook his head. He looked at Nico. "You can never count on family, can you?"

Will wasn't sure what he was talking about, but Nico seemed to understand. He looked intently at the boy.

"Are you..." Nico hesitated, "referring to your brother?"

"You've met Minos?" The boy looked surprised.

"When I was ten," Nico admitted. "He almost tricked me into raising him from the dead with Daedalus' soul. He tried to sell me to Kronos and everything."

"Yes, that sounds like him. He's a very tricky fellow isn't he?" Rhadamanthus said amiably. "He certainly got me once or twice. Definitely in the end there." His tone became bitter.

"In the end?" Nico asked. "You mean when you were banished-?"

"Banished?!" Rhadamanthus interrupted with petulant laugh. "Yes, when Minos became the king of Crete he banished our other brother, Sarpedon, for crimes against the crown. But Minos never banished me."

"He let you stay with him?" Nico asked looking surprised. "I thought- well, that doesn't seem like Minos. I thought he was a bit of a manipulative jerk- uh, no offense."

"Of course not!" Rhadamanthus said. "He was the worst older brother one could possibly have! I assume you know the story about his precious minotaur? The one he kept locked away in Daedalus' monstrous creation, that great Labyrinth?" Rhadamanthus laughed bitterly. "Every nine years or so, seven boys and seven girls were chosen from all over the island to go on what you might now call a 'field trip'. These children were given the opportunity to go into the Labyrinth, to study it's inner mechanisms, unearth it's secrets. We were the most gifted children, we were told. It was the greatest honor throughout Crete for school children. The year Minos became king, I was selected as one of the chosen."

Rhadamanthus gazed wistfully out at the lake.

"At least that's the story we were all sold," he continued. "I was so excited. It was an honor, you know. We were going to see the great Labyrinth, one of the greatest wonders in creation. But
everything we had been told was a lie. Once we entered the Labyrinth, the doorway closed behind us. We were shut in there, alone. Abandoned. All we had really been chosen for was to be the minotaur's next meal, to keep him fed for another nine years." Rhadamanthus paused, breathing hard through his nose, his eyes fixed somewhere past Nico, maybe on a different time period altogether. "I lasted four years down there before that beast caught up with me."

The boy met Nico's eyes. "Let me offer you some advice, Nico; don't ever get eaten alive. It's not a pleasant experience."

Nico had no idea how to respond to the boy's story. How could he comfort someone, a ghost, over something that had happened hundreds of years ago?

Apparently Rhadamanthus wasn't expecting to be comforted thought. "Do you like stories, Will Solace?" he continued suddenly, looking at the son of Apollo.

"I'm sorry?" Will asked, taken aback by the turn in the conversation.

"You are a son of Apollo," Rhadamanthus pressed. "If that is anything to go by, I presume you enjoy poetry? Music? Art? They are all stories, though told in different languages."

"I guess so," said Will. "I'm not so great at creating them myself, but I do like them."

Rhadamanthus nodded, his gold eyes watching Will curiously.

"I see. Everything's a story, you know. And for most demigods they end in tragedy. You're a healer, not a fighter, I can sense this about you, son of Apollo. You have no experience as a warrior and yet you're leading this quest anyways. I assume this is all for your father? Your family?"

Will flushed. "Yeah, I guess so."

"You'd better be sure of your reasons," said Rhadamanthus. "Mixed loyalties have been the demise of many. You certainly don't want to end up like I did."

"Mixed loyalties," Will said blankly. "I know why I'm doing this; my dad needs to be saved."

"Minos used to speak to me about loyalty, about what it means to be loyal to one's family. He asked me to prove myself to him once. He charged me with overseeing the children who were selected to go into the labyrinth. It was around that time that I discovered the truth behind the Labyrinth. I was horrified. I couldn't send fourteen kids to their deaths, simply because my brother- the King-ordered me to. So instead I chose treason. I betrayed him."

"You did the right thing." Will said. "You tried to save the kids from a horrible fate."

Rhadamanthus laughed.

"Yes, I tried. It was a terrible mistake; I should never have followed my suspicions, should never have gone digging. All that came of it was I myself becoming the victim. It achieved nothing. For years after that the tradition continued. I got lucky, when I came to the Underworld; Lord Hades took pity on me and allowed me to work for him instead of being cast into the fields of punishment. He has a soft spot for those who are abandoned by their family." Rhadamanthus stopped and sighed. "My point is that you'd better know for sure who you're trying to help. I know you demigods have had two wars in two consecutive years. Don't start a third."

"Erm, okay," Will intoned nervously. "But I can't just abandon my dad."
"Sure you can!" exclaimed Rhadamanthus. "It's easy. Go home."

"And what?" Will challenged. "Watch my siblings die, knowing I could have saved them."

"You might save them," Rhadamanthus snarled. "Or you might make it worse. Like I said, the odds are stacked against you already. Perhaps Olympus would even be better off without Apollo. It would certainly teach Zeus some respect, if it were his own fault his son was killed."

"Olympus is not better off without Apollo," Lou Ellen said fiercely. "We're going to save him. Will's not alone on this quest. We've beaten God's before."

Rhadamanthus sighed. "If that is your choice, so be it. So why have you come to me? I doubt it was to exchange pleasantries and talk about how awful our families are."

Nico decided Rhadamanthus's definition of 'pleasantries' must differ greatly from his own.

"We need to get to the Oneiroi for help," he said. "I've heard that the shortest route to their home is through your kingdom-"

"Yes," Rhadamanthus interrupted. "You can get to them through Elysium, but I fear it would be a terrible mistake. You cannot go to the Oneiroi."

"Why not?" asked Nico. "It seems pretty clear to me from the flower and Will's dreams that it's where we must go."

"That's true," said Rhadamanthus. "If the Oneiroi really are guiding you to themselves though, I fear their intentions are less than pleasant. Their allegiances have changed since Gaea almost rose to power. They're even hosting the games this year."

"Games?" asked Nico. "What games?"

To his surprise it was not Rhadamanthus who answered him.

"The Pythian Games," Will whispered from behind him.

Everyone looked at the son of Apollo in surprise.

"The Pythian Games?" Nico asked. "What do you know about them?"

"Every child of Apollo knows about the Pythian games," Will stated. "They're held in Apollo's honor at Delphi. I can't believe I didn't think of it sooner. That must be where Apollo is!"

"You'd best hope not," Rhadamanthus interrupted.

"What are you talking about?" Will almost shouted. "This is great news! He's not been kidnapped after all- he's gone back to the place where it all started, where he was celebrated-"

"The Pythian Games are no longer in his honor," Rhadamanthus told him gently. "I've heard things, from the souls that pass through my gates. Apparently Python has taken up residence as ruler of Delphi. In a week, a new version of the games will occur. A 'Grand Reopening' if you like. Now that Python is reborn, they are being held in his own vision- and a warped one at that. I admit I was surprised when I heard about it. I couldn't believe Python would be so brazen as to declare himself the ruler of Delphi again, but if what you say is true, that Apollo's power is at an end, I suppose it was only a matter of time."

Will looked thunderstruck.
"Apollo's power is not 'at an end' as you say," Nico snapped at the King. "We have it with us. We'll restore it, but we need your help in getting there."

"Very well," Rhadamanthus sighed. He peered thoughtfully at Will. "But if you insist on this quest, be warned the journey will not be easy. The Oneiroi reside in caves far to the West."

Rhadamanthus pointed across the lake, across the wheat fields even, towards the mountain range.

"Your destination is deep within those mountains. The real challenge will be getting through them. You will have to navigate through the Labyrinth of Dreams."

"I've heard of that place," said Nico. "Although I don't know much about it."

"Think of it as the welcome mat to the Oneiroi's home," said Rhadamanthus. "It's a spectacular feat, as I'm told, a front garden fit for the masters of dreams. I daresay it's exactly what it sounds like."

Cecil looked upset. "So it'll be like digging our way through our own dreams?"

Rhadamanthus shrugged.

"Dreams, memories, illusions, wishes. It all goes hand-in-hand with the Oneiroi. I must confess, I am not all that familiar with the Oneiroi as individuals, which I fear may be key in succeeding. Follow the Western highway from Elysium, towards the mountains, and you'll run into a town. I advise you to seek out someone named Simonides. He was a scholar in life, fascinated by the Labyrinth, so I daresay he'll be more knowledgeable than I."

"Thank you, my Lord," Nico said earnestly.

Rhadamanthus looked sad. "Don't mention it, son of Hades. My guess is that next time I see you, I'll be deciding your fate in the judgment pavilion."

"Wonderful," Nico muttered glumly.

"Hopefully, you will also find shelter at the town. You four look exhausted."

Nico, Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil said their goodbyes and went.

The Western highway began at the opposite side of the lake, a long, winding dirt road weaving through the rolling wheat fields.

"So how far is this town we're going to?" Asked Will.

"No idea."

Will looked at him confused.

"I thought you were an expert on this place."

"I am. But I've never had reason to explore this far."

Gold fields blanketed before them as far as the eye could see, their tops budded with bright yellow flowers. Elysium was warm, and hazy, a soft breeze gusting over the fields. The winds seemed to continuously shift, carrying a variety of scents. At one moment Nico thought he smelled the sea salt and the ocean, but it faded to be replaced by the earthier scent of various spices. He thought he caught a whiff of nutmeg, jasmine, and cedar.
"This isn't as bad as I thought it would be," Will said briskly, breathing in the air.

"That's because you're in Elysium Blondie," Nico told him. "If you like I could take you to the Fields of Punishment next. They're pretty nice."

"Oh sure. That sounds great," Will said sarcastically.

"And if you really like it," Nico continued, "you can give yourself over to a life of crime, destruction, and malevolence, and live there for all eternity."

"Pssh. You don't have to tell me twice," said Cecil. "I'm sold."

Lou Ellen rolled her eyes.

"Would you come visit me?" Will asked with a smile.

Nico shrugged. "I might drop by on occasion, just to see how you're holding up Blondie."

Will bit his lip and grinned. Nico was relieved to see he appeared more at ease now that they were moving away from the city.

"How far do we have to walk? My feet hurt," Lou Ellen muttered from behind them.

"Sucks to suck," said Cecil.

"It's alright," she said cheerfully. "Will will massage them for me, won't you Will?"

Nico snorted.

"Like hell I will."

Lou Ellen giggled.

"I'll braid your hair for you," she offered, smirking. "And give you another cucumber facial. They really opened your pores right up-"

"Well in that case, sign me up," Will muttered.


After an hour of walking through the rolling fields of gold, they came upon a small town. They stopped and stared at it in disbelief.

Nico would have laughed, but he was too exhausted.

"You know," Will said, "when he said we would find a town, and that it was in the Underworld, I didn't realize it would be an actual Ghost Town."

Nico agreed.

In front of them stood an old-west-style town. A dusty main road ran down the center, flanked with a row of old wooden buildings on either side. The windows were either shattered or missing panes, or boarded up altogether. A dilapidated door swung and creaked on it's hinges. Besides a skeletal horse who stood in a coral on the left side, and a creepy old ghost farmer missing all of his teeth, the place was silent, empty, and altogether dead. The entire look was topped off with a hitching post and a tumbleweed blowing across the front.
"Where do we go?" Asked Cecil, wrinkling his nose at the smell of skeletal horse manure. "The place is empty."

Lou Ellen alone looked excited.

"We go where every person in every movie has always gone when they stumble into a ghost town," She said eagerly. "The saloon. Duh." She pointed to a sign swinging lazily over the double doors of a run-down barn house.

"Ye Olde Saloon," Nico read aloud.

"That sounds about right," Cecil muttered.

"Oh yeah," Lou Ellen drawled, slowly pulled off her sunglasses. "Let's do this ya'll."

They trudged into town.
Ye' Dusty Old Saloon turned out to be the life n' soul of the town. That is, once you got past the spiders, skeletons, and dead soullessness.

The first thing Will noticed was the cobwebs. The entire room, the tables, chairs, people, and even the skeletal canine in the corner were swathed in them, like nothing had moved since the dawn of evolution. In fact, he was pretty sure the curtains and carpet were completely woven from the material. The sad thing was that they'd have to walk through them all to get inside. The sadder thing was that the spiders themselves still lived in them. The saddest thing was that the bartender himself was a spider. Worst of all, was the fact that the spider was wearing eight monocles over each of his beady little eyes. Will supposed even Elysium could only do so much for A.O.U.S.'s (Arachnids of Unusual Size).

Now, Will fancied himself an open-minded individual but he wasn't sure how he felt about chumming it up with a giant tarantula.

The second thing Will noticed was the people. Two little ghoul girls stared at him forlornly, decaying and chewing on moldy breadsticks. They watched him with their big silvery eyes. He was pretty sure they were the girls from The Shining. The tarantula-bartender was talking (yes, talking.) with a voluptuous, beefy guy, with a bald head of hair and a huge corkscrew mustache that more than made up for it. There were about ten people total, all of whom stared blankly at the four, very much alive, demigods.

Lou Ellen wrinkled her nose at the odor of dust and decomposition. "Um, Nico? Are you sure we're still in Elysium?" she asked anxiously.

Nico smirked in amusement as he looked around the room, admiring the interior décor, like he was getting inspiration. "Definitely," he said. "People can go wherever they choose to in Elysium. Some want a beautiful palace in a field of wheat, some like a spider-infested ghost town ripe with sadness and dust, and some want to sail the seven seas on a pirate ship beside Captain Jack Sparrow."

Will grinned. "Which is it you want?" He asked with a smirk, recalling how Nico had asked for a hook if Will had to amputate his arm the first day in the infirmary.

Nico's eyes glittered as he pondered Will. "I suppose being a pirate wouldn't be half-bad," he murmured. He looked back at the cobwebs running from wall to wall. "It's a good thing none of us are children of Athena. What's the plan guys?"

"I say we dive through it all, like in spy movies when the main guy has to get through a bunch of lasers," Cecil said eagerly. "It'll be good practice for when I rob that convenience store!"

Lou Ellen glared at him. "Cecil, so help me, if you ever get arrested for robbing a convenience store, don't count on me to pay your bail money."

Cecil winked at her. "You'd be my one phone call though." Lou Ellen blushed and looked away, biting her lip to hide her smile.
"That's hot," Will said flatly.

Nico stared at them all in disgust. "Or," he muttered, "we can just hack our way through." He drew his sword and began slicing at the webs

"You're no fun Nico," said Cecil, but he moved to help him. It didn't do much good. By the time they reached the other side, Will was wrapped in a cocoon of sticky silk with a spider attempting to lay it's eggs in his ear.

They reached the spider-bartender, who balanced two glasses in his barbed pincers. He was polishing them, but it was more like smearing the grease and grime around until they were nicely coated in a veil of sludge. His voice consisted of southern drawls garnished with hisses and clicks, as he chattered heartily with the bald guy.

The spiders back was to them and Lou Ellen looked back at the three boys, all of whom nodded encourageingly. "Excuse me?" Lou Ellen asked, looking plainly terrified. The spider whirled on her, turning away from his beefy friend. She flinched as eight eyes fell on her.

"Why howdy there Lass," he hissed wetly, spraying her with syrupy spider-spittle. "What can I do fer ya and yer sssexy friendssss?"

Lou Ellen spluttered, opening and closing her mouth a few times, to stricken to respond. She looked around again at the three boys, none of whom offered her any help.

Next to Will, Nico smirked and leaned over. "He sounds like you Blondie!" Will shivered when his breath tickled his ear (you know, not because there were spider eggs in it).

"Shut up Death Boy," he whispered back as best he could. Nico's face was only inches from his, and it was enough to make his heart want to dance the flamenco. It was with sudden appreciation that Will noticed how good the son of Hades smelled... well, technically it took him standing in a manure-infested ghost town in the Underworld to notice it, but really it just made him appreciate Nico all the more.

Lou Ellen glared at the two of them, whispering conspiringly, as she wiped the ichor from her face. She turned back to the spider and tried again. "Hi," she stammered. "We were wondering, uh, if we could get some rooms? For the four of us?"

The spider eyed her thoughtfully, clicking softly as he considered them. "Le' me ssssee. The four of you, eh?" He ran a gnarled leg over several of his eyes, knocking most of his monocles off. "Ah can give ya two roomssss. Both of 'em with a couple o' cotssss. Nice n' cozy, am ah right? I would offer you more, but thiss place is hoppin'."

"Seriously?" Cecil asked in disbelief, before remembering he was too scared to talk.

The spider nodded eagerly. "Oh yesss. It's tourist season here. Not many places can boast the title of an authentic dude ranch. Here, take a brochure with you. Tomorrow's Irish Tuesday- we're ssbservin' haggis and blood puddin'."

"Wow. Thank you sir," Lou Ellen muttered, looking like she'd rather be anywhere else.

"Now tha's a sssight ta behold," the spider hissed, snapping his pincers. "We don' offen get real live wrigglin' ones, now do we folkssss?" The ten or so dead people in the Saloon gave no indication that they heard him, nor that they were capable of hearing at all. In fact, some of them were missing their ears. None of them seemed to find it at all unusual that a spider was running the place. "Ya'll 'ill find yer rooms upssstairs in the attic."
The four of them exchanged disbelieving glances. The Attic? Lou's eyes asked, wondering if she'd heard correctly.

Cecil stared back at her blankly. That's what I heard too. Said his raised eyebrows.

So who wants to share a room with me? Asked Will's smirk. His eyes traveled sideways and met Nico's.

Kill me now. The son of Hades deadpanned.

"There's actually one more thing," Will said quickly. He flinched when the spider fixed eight eyes on him. "We were sent here by King Rhadamanthus. We're trying to find a guy named Simonides."

"THA'SSS MEEEE!" The spider shrieked in apparent glee, making all four of them jump.

Will stared at the newly named spider. "Oh. Wonderful."

Simonides nodded. "Ya'll just head on upsssstairs and get ssettled," he told them. "Then come on down an' we'll have a chat."

They thanked the spider, fled up the rickety staircase in the corner, and found themselves in what could only be described as the attic. It was dark, warm, and disgustingly grimy. A quick check behind several of the doors and they located what must have been their rooms.

"This sucks," Lou Ellen hissed, brushing one of her braids out of her face. "Nico, I think your friend Rhadamanthus was trying to kill us!"

"So who's sleeping with who?" Asked Cecil, turning to look at his friends.

Lou Ellen laughed. "Cecil this is a quest, not the latest episode of Sex in the City."

Cecil frowned. "Didn't that show end?"

"Lou and I can stay together," Will said immediately. He shifted uncomfortably, remembering his dream. He had no desire to place unnecessary risk on Nico's life and sharing a room with him would certainly do so. Besides, the thought of spending a night alone with him made him feel strangely naughty. Will risked a glance at him and saw that Nico was already watching him through narrowed eyes, like he knew exactly what was on his mind.

"Will you're being ridiculous," Nico murmured quietly. "You can't honestly think you're going to hurt me."

"It's not something I'm willing to risk," Will told him uncomfortably, aware of Lou Ellen and Cecil watching them. "You may think it's funny, but I don't."

"Will, you're not going to kill me," Nico complained. "I'm telling you, your dream was normal. Well, not normal, but you know what I mean."

"How can you be sure?" Will asked unhappily. He didn't understand how Nico could brush it off so easily, when it was his life at stake. Will recalled how he had been on the verge of sending himself into oblivion back on Half-Blood Hill and hadn't seemed to care or how he hadn't been concerned about the infected werewolf scratches on his arm either. It was fine now, but Will's eyes fell to his side where he had been clawed again only two days ago, wondering if he would bother to mention if something was wrong.
Cecil was watching them with his brow furrowed. "What's this about a dream?" he asked.

Nico tore his gaze away from the Will and looked at the son of Hermes. "Will had a dream he was suffocating me with a pillow. Now he's crazy and paranoid."

"Huh. Interesting." Cecil frowned thoughtfully. "You know, if you subscribe to Sigmund Freud's theories--"

"I don't!" Nico and Will shouted simultaneously.

Cecil raised an eyebrow. "Sheesh guys. I'm just exploring all possibilities!" He rolled his eyes and sighed. "Will, I know you. You've never hurt a person before in your life."

"Actually," said Nico, "he did try to skewer me with a needle once."

"No I didn't!" Will cried. "Your arm was about to shrivel off di Angelo!"

Lou Ellen nodded. "Cecil's right Will. You're like a giant teddy bear. Maybe you misinterpreted your dream. It probably just means that you'll have a pillow fight or something."

Nico snorted derisively. "Please. Like I'd ever sink to such levels."

Will glared sulkily at them, looking from one disbelieving face to another. Clearly they all thought he was insane. "You know what? Fine! I suppose someone's got to keep an eye on Death Boy anyways. Besides, I need to check and make sure your side is healing." He proceeded to grab the son of Hades by the elbow and dragged him protesting towards the rooms, choosing one at random.

Lou Ellen stared after him in surprise. "Wait, I never said I wouldn't share a room with you! We were going to give each other facials, remember?"

"Too late!" Will cried stubbornly. "You had your chance and you missed it. Looks like you're stuck with Cecil."

"What do you mean you have to keep an eye on me?" Nico snapped. "And my side is fine!" His complaint came out extremely half-hearted however, and he barely fought to free himself. Will looked at him and saw he was slowly turning pink and looking around nervously, like he was misbehaving.

"Don't forget you were poisoned only yesterday di Angelo. Besides, I'm still expecting you to ditch us." Will said, opening the door.

He was pleasantly surprised by the room.

It was decent size. The ceiling was covered in more cobwebs, but the rest looked surprisingly hospitable. There were two beds, Will was relieved to see and they were layered in thick white comforters and a multitude of fluffy white pillows, just waiting to be snuggled with. To be honest, Will had been expecting a cave, or a spider's nest.

He ran, throwing his bags down, and jumped gleefully onto the nearest bed with a wild cry. His glee faded when a cloud of dust billowed off it and he began coughing and sneezing.

Nico proceeded with more caution, sitting down gingerly on the opposite bed.

"Well, this should be fun," Will exclaimed. He was rewarded with a look of pure malcontentment
from the son of Hades. "Now we can play 'truth or dare' and tell each other all of our embarrassing
secrets."

He almost laughed at the look of disgust on Nico's face. "Forget what I said before," Nico
grumbled. "You're right Blondie, you might kill me." He crossed his arms and glared at the wall as
if to emphasize his displeasure with the turn of events.

"That's not funny di Angelo," Will said, his smile fading. An uncomfortable silence filled the air
between them, and he watched as Nico shifted nervously, tapping his foot. Now that they were
alone together he couldn't think of anything to say to him. His hand was clenched on his lap,
turning his knuckles white. He stretched and winced slightly, the movement catching Will's
attention.

"Take off your shirt," He ordered, sliding off of his bed.

Nico looked at him in alarm. "Why?" He asked, dark eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"I need to make sure those scratches are healing," Will grabbed his medical bag up from the floor.
Nico watched him warily, pressing his hand gently over his side as if he'd only just remembered
he had been injured the day before.

"It's fine Solace," he complained, watching as Will pulled ambrosia out of his bag. "I don't need
that. You said they weren't deep, and the poison is long gone."

"I know what I said," Will murmured. "But after the stunt you pulled with your arm, I'm not going
to take your word for it. Let me see."

Nico watched him warily for a good ten seconds before complying. He left his shirt on, but
grudgingly allowed Will to kneel beside the bed and pull up the hem. He shivered as the cold air
touched his skin, and Will could feel him glaring at the top of his head mistrustfully, like he
expected him to whip out another needle and skewer him with it. "I told you it's fine," he mumbled.

It wasn't completely healed yet, but it was nowhere near as bad as his arm had been. The claw
marks were almost closed completely and faded to a dark pink. The color contrasted startlingly
with the light skin of his stomach. "It is fine," Will murmured.

Nico snorted. "You almost sound disappointed Solace."

"That's not true!" Will felt himself flush. "I just thought... I saw you wince." Will placed his hand
softly over the cuts and heard Nico's breath catch. He looked up at him and saw that he was sitting
rigidly on the bed, jaw locked and holding his breath. With a jolt, Will realized he appeared
frightened. He withdrew his hand instantly. "Sorry." Nico didn't answer and looked away. Will
waited for him to say something, but as per usual he didn't seem to be in a talking-mood. "Does it
hurt at all?" Will asked him.

At his question Nico turned to glare at him again. "No. It doesn't matter."

Will frowned at him. "That sounded like two different answers."

"I'm sorry you feel that way Solace," Nico snapped. He jerked away from Will and yanked his shirt
back over his side. He folded his arms protectively and chewed his lip, refusing to look at him.

"Fine," Will sighed. He held out the small square of ambrosia. "At least eat this."

"No."
"Nico!" Will said exasperated. "You convinced me to let you shadow travel us down here, and you're lucky you even got to do that. I was so caught up in wanting to find my dad, I let you, even though it was against my better judgment. Take the ambrosia and get better dammit!"

Nico cast him a startled looked, but he took the ambrosia Will was pressing into his hands. "You're mean to me."

Will resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Oh yes. I'm so evil for making you take care of yourself." He glared pointedly at him until Nico grumbled something incoherent and nibbled on the end. He stared down at his knees, chewing slowly, and Will got the impression he was trying not to look at him.

"Nico?" he asked quietly. Nico cast him an oddly nervous glance, which only lasted a second before he looked away again.

Will shifted uncomfortably. "If you're that worried about sharing a room with me, I'm sure Lou or Cecil will trade..." He looked at the floor uncomfortably as Nico stared at him.

"I already told you. I'm not worried about it," Nico muttered, looking annoyed. "Why do you keep asking?"

"You look nervous," Will said. He himself felt nervous around the son of Hades, but he was sure it was due to an entirely different reason... 

Nico flushed slightly. He glanced at Will, looking away as soon as he met his gaze. "It's not because of your dream Blondie."

"What is it then?" Will asked in concern. Nico didn't answer. "Is it the quest you're worried about?"

"Sure. Let's go with that." Nico murmured.

"Which part?" Will asked. "The Labyrinth, or Python, or... me?"

Nico looked swiftly at him. "What do you mean 'you'?"

Will hesitated. "You don't think I can lead this quest." It seemed it was the logical conclusion for the son of Hades to reach. Next to any one of his siblings, Will considered himself to be quite unremarkable. Nico di Angelo however, was the most remarkable demigod Will believed he had ever met. 

Nico looked shocked by his comment. "That's not at all what I think, Will," he said forcefully, like he was determined for Will to understand it. "Far from it. I think you're possibly the bravest person I know." Will looked up at him, shocked.

"Bravest?" he asked, wondering if Nico was simply taking pity on him. Either that, or he was succumbing to madness. "I can't even fight."

"That's why." Nico interrupted. "It's true, Solace, you're terrible with a sword, and completely incompetent with a bow. It's the most pathetic thing I've ever seen in my life. You should stay in the infirmary during the battle, out of harms way, but instead you rush outside trying to fight to fight anyways." Nico hesitated and looked down at his hands, twirling the ring on his finger. "It sca- worries me too. I- I don't want to see you get hurt." Nico seemed embarrassed by the end of his little speech. He let out a shaky breath and stared down at the floor again.

Will stared at him in surprise. He'd never considered Nico to be someone who cared about others'
safety, not since he didn't harbor any love for his own. Perhaps he'd misjudged him, Will thought, maybe that was really the problem. Perhaps he was too worried about others, and that was why he never seemed to take any care for himself.

Will didn't answer and looked around, shifting in discomfort. He didn't see any other doors in the room except for the one they had entered from...

"What's wrong with you?" Nico asked, staring at him in general worry for his sanity.

Will pouted. "I have to pee." He announced, completely ruining the moment.

"Oh God's," Nico muttered, rolling his eyes. "Please tell me you're potty-trained."

Will glared at him sternly. "Ha ha. Where do you think the bathroom is in this place?"

Nico bit his lip to keep from grinning and pointed behind him. Will turned and looked to see a small brass chamber pot in the corner. "Have at it Blondie," Nico said. Will stared at it in uncomprehending disbelief and Nico snickered at his expression.

"Nico!" Will said exasperated, turning to glare at him. "How is this funny?"

"Hey," Nico gasped, "back in my day those were all the rage!"

"'Back in your day'? You're seriously playing that card?" Will groaned. "Death Boy, you were born in the nineteen-thirties. You had working plumbing by then!"

Nico shrugged. "Not all the time," he said. "My family fled Italy during World War II. I can recall it getting pretty crazy at times."

Will stared at him in shock.

"I didn't know you were born in Italy," he said softly. He had noticed before that despite Nico's paleness, he did seem to have a slightly olive skin-tone. Will had found himself admiring the contrast between his dark hair and white skin on more than one occasion. His eyes, of course, he found otherworldly. Glittering with secrets and mysteries, they reminded Will of galaxies twinkling with the light of stars.

Will realized he was staring at the poor guy again and looked away.

Nico seemed dubious. "Where did you think I was born Solace?"

Will shrugged. "I dunno. New York?"

"Of course not!" Nico exclaimed. "Where do you think I get my marvelous olive skin-tone, and impeccable taste for good cuisine?"

Will stared at him. Nico looked embarrassed. "It was a joke." He muttered, uncomfortably. "And the last time I ever try it."

"If you were born in Italy..." Will spoke slowly, narrowing his eyes at the dark haired boy. Nico looked weary, like he already knew what question was coming. "...do you know Italian?"

Nico snorted. "Of course not Solace. I preferred to go about daily-life in a state of blissful ignorance, allowing everyone else to take care of me." Will gaped at him and Nico sighed. "Yes. I can speak Italian. And no," Nico added as Will opened his mouth eagerly, "I am not going to demonstrate it for you."
"But please?!" Will moaned, giving him the biggest, saddest, puppy-dog eyes he could possibly muster. He must have overexerted his facial muscles though, because Nico looked more disturbed than anything. "Think about it di Angelo! You can insult me however you want, and I wouldn't even know. Please say something?"

"Fine." Nico muttered. He thought for a second, pondering Will with dark eyes, and then said, "Io non ti lascerò." He looked nervously at Will and asked, "Happy?"

"Mmm-hmm." Will beamed at him. "I have no idea what you said, but yes. I'm happy. Hey," he gasped, struck with an idea, "do you think we knew each other in my past life?"

"What kind of question is that Solace?" Nico asked, utterly gobsmacked.

"Wouldn't that be cool?" gasped Will, warming to his new idea. "Maybe we were like Sherlock and Watson? And we solved crimes?!"

Nico snorted. "That's absurd Solace. I would've been, like, five. Although," he added thoughtfully, "if I did know you, it would explain the growing sense of dread and ineludibilty I feel whenever I see you."

"Now who's being absurd? I'm a delight!"

Nico wrinkled his nose in response.

"I still have to go to the bathroom." Will muttered into the silence.

"Sucks to be you."

"Well," Will sighed, "there's only one thing for it. Cover your eyes di Angelo."

"Solace!" Nico yelled furiously. "I'm sure there's a bathroom around here somewhere. Go find it!"

Will shook his head fiercely. "Heck no! I'm not going down there and talking to that spider again by myself!"

Nico sighed. "Would you like me to go with you Blondie?"


They ran into Lou Ellen and Cecil in the hallway. "Hey guys," Lou Ellen said. "We were just coming to find you. Where are you going?"

"Will needs to go for a potty-walk," Nico muttered with a smirk. He glanced thoughtfully at the blonde boy like he wanted to get him a leash and collar as well.

Lou Ellen grinned at the comment. "Okay. While we're down there, we should probably go see what Simonides has to say."

Everything was as it had been a minutes before. Simonides hissed in excitement when he saw his new friends.

"Ya'll are jussst in time for sssupper," he hissed with a nasty grin.

Lou Ellen gulped, staring at the apron that was now tied around his hairy body. "Wow. What's on the menu? I'm kind of afraid to ask." She chuckled awkwardly.
"Well," hissed the spider, "ssssseein' as we don' get no live folkss, the only thang we gots that's sstill edible is thisss here hardtack. Have a ssstt and tell me about you're travelssss. We'll eatss together."

Nico and Will shared looks of horror as they grudgingly took seats at the bar, next to the fat guy. Nico wondered how he got his mustache to stay so spirally. The spider slammed down six greasy glasses of murky liquid and a platter of rock-hard flat bread. Nico assumed it was their promised hardtack.

"This water looks all-natural," Lou Ellen said admirably, twirling the glass of foggy liquid.

The spider nodded excitedly. "Oh yesss, it is Lassss. It comesss from Fecal Creek!"

Lou Ellen froze with a mouthful of it in her mouth.

"It comes from what creek?" asked Cecil.

"Fecal Creek. It runssss right next to the Outhousesss. Givesss the water a bit o' natural ssseasonin'."

"Now you know where the bathrooms are Blondie," Nico muttered.

Lou Ellen spat out the water.

"Oy! What'sss wrong with ya girlie!?!" The spider screeched. "Ya can't wassste it like that. Thiss here'sss the ssstuff of life!"

"But you're dead." Will muttered. The spider ignored him.

"T'was in yer day, Simmy," said the bald guy, belching heartily on hardtack. "In ma day the stuff of life was whiskey! Say, ya gots any whiskey? I need tah gatha mah strength before the roundup."

"Ah sure do darlin'." The spider disappeared behind the bar to grab a glass, which he began filling with clear-brown liquid. "Ssay, perhapsss one of these chapsss could help ya with it." He looked at the four demigods thoughtfully. His eyes fell on Will as he cautiously plucked a slice of hardtack from the center of the bar.

"You look like a sssturdy, robussst lad," he hissed, clapping Will on the shoulder hard enough that his hardtack spilled from his mouth. "How would ya like ter wrangle up them horsesss?"

"Um-" Will choked on his bread, "I don't know how to-"

"Ssssplendid!" Roared Simonides. "If ya do a mighty fine job, I may let ya muck their stalls for me too. Plato will help ya."

"Who?"

Simonides pointed to the bald guy with the corkscrew mustache who waved at them. "Plato. He'sss my gay lover."

Nico hacked loudly on his hardtack, which he'd been gnawing desperately on for ten minutes trying make it swallowable. Simonides, Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil all stared at him.

"Oy! Yer doin' it wrong. Ya gotsss ta sssswallow it like pillssss Laddie!" The spider hissed helpfully. He raised an eyebrow as Nico continued spluttering and coughing, his face turning into an eggplant.
Nico slapped his hand on the table choking wildly. "I- sorry- BLEGCK!" He regurgitated the hardtack on to the table.

"NO LADDIE!" the spider howled. "Ussse the spittoon!" He pointed a leg at a wooden bucket behind the four Halfbloods. "If ya'll hate the water so much, ya'll gots ta try this!" He slammed a glass of dark liquid down in front of Will.

Nico glared furiously at all of them, a brilliant shade of maroon. "Can we just get to the reason we're all here?" he croaked hoarsely. "I'm about ready to shadow travel as far from here as possible. The dark side of the moon should suffice."

Lou Ellen looked curiously at him. "Have you ever tried to shadow travel to a different planet Nico?"

"No."

"Have you ever tried to shadow travel underwater?" asked Will, cautiously taking a sip of his new drink. It was delicious.

"No."

"Have you ever shadow traveled out of your clothes?" asked Cecil.

Nico froze. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I'd like to see that," Will giggled. Everyone stared at him.

Lou Ellen wrinkled her nose and pulled his drink away from him. "Okay, you're cut off."

Simonides rolled his eyes. "It hardly mattersss. That's sssarsaparilla that he'ss drinkin'. It'ss non-alcoholic."

Will blinked at him. "Seriously? That's embarrassing."

"Don' ever feel bad fer expressin' yerself." Simonides said clapping him on the back. "Besides, that Placebo Effect isss a real bitch."

"That it is," Will agreed.

"Okay that's enough," Nico said firmly. He turned back to Simonides. "King Rhadamanthus sent us. He said you could help us get to the Labyrinth of Dreams."

"Get to it?" Plato asked in disbelief. He turned to Nico with a tired sigh like he was used to delivering the same speech. "Listen here you guys. It's madness to try to find the Oneiroi's Labyrinth, much less attempt a journey through it. It'll mess with your mind, make you see things. Things you won't ever be able to un-see."

"How do you know so much about it?" Will asked him. Before Plato could answer, Simonides hissed angrily.

"Because once upon a time I lived there," he said. The four demigod's looked at him in surprise. "Those cavess were my home. When Morpheusss and his brother's powers began encroaching on the place, I was forced to flee. It'll drive ya mad, bring your worst fearssss to life. I can't imagine what could possibly make you want to go there."

"We're on a quest," explained Will. "I'm trying to save my siblings and my father, and the only way
to do that is to meet with the Oneiroi. We believe they have information. They can help us."

"No one goes up there," said Plato. "It's deep in the heart o' the mountains, and the journey's perilous. The only person brave enough to go up there is ol' Croony, when he makes deliveries to Snow Shamans. Unfortunately, he'll be competin' in a banjo tournament at the Palace all this week."

"Croony?" Will asked.

"Aye, Croony." Simonides confirmed with a nod. "Croony Van Crunk as we call him. He usually runs the trail rides fer us this time o' the year."

"Who exactly is this Croony Van Crunk, and where can we find him before he leaves?" Nico asked, still fanning himself after the embarrassment of his coughing fit. His question was answered before anyone had the chance to respond.

"I'm Croony Van Crunk," growled a voice behind them.

The six of them all looked towards the door. A tall, gruff looking man in full cowboy gettup stood there, his shirt, pants, and boots were all oily-black, lined in black snakeskin. He had long scraggly black hair, and a thick beard greying to silver. His eyes were a cloudy ash color, lined with thick black eyeliner. His fingernails were also painted black and he had a small brand on his inner wrist. A glittering black banjo was slung over his shoulder. He glared at the six of them in suspicion.

"Why hello there Croony!" Plato shouted. "Fancy seein' you around-"

"I certainly hope you haven't promised these kids anything," Croony growled over him. "My next trip into them mountains won't be fer another week. I need ta be gettin' to the city fer mah concert."

"But we don't have a week!" Will said forcefully. "We need to speak with the Oneiroi and-"

"Well tha's jus' too damn bad, ain't it kid?" Croony growled menacingly. "My fangurls are far mo' important than any quest o' yours could possibly be."

"I'm trying to save my family," Will told him. "My father's in danger and Python-"

"Oh, blah blah blah." Croony waved his hand. "Ah gots a stadium o' fifty screaming girls who like a bad-boy." He eyed Will up and down. "Can you say the same Sugarplum?"

"Sure I can!" Will exclaimed. He turned to his friends. "I've got them right here with me, right guys? Guys?" Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil were staring at him with expressions that suggested they were constipated. "Lou?" Will asked hopefully.


"See?" Will asked, turning back to Croony. "I'm cool too. Now take us to the Labyrinth... please?"

"No," Croony said shortly. "I'm afraid mah banjo showdown is far too important."

Apparently Nico had had enough at that point because he stood up from his chair and placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. "That's it. Listen here you buffoon," he growled. "I know Blondie is a bit of a neurotic nutcracker, but if he says we need to get to the mountains, then we need to get to the mountains, and you are going to take us there and we can do it the easy way or the hard way! Your fangirls can friggin' wait! And if you refuse so help me I will take your banjo and shove it-"
Will yanked him back before he could unleash his wrath on the unsuspecting cowboy.

"It's alright Nico, I've got this." Will told him quietly. "You say you've got a banjo showdown?" he demanded loudly at Croony, feeling unusually courageous from his placebo effect. "I say we have our own banjo showdown, right here, right now Croony. If I win, we leave tomorrow morning and you tell us all about the Oneiroi's Labyrinth. If you win... we fail this quest and go home in shame, allowing my father to perish at the hands of Python."

Croony eyed him up slowly. "Well alright. You've got yerself a deal Kid."

"Will!" Nico looked at him in alarm. "Are you sure about this? Please, just let me beat him up. It'll be way easier."

"Trust me. I've got this," said Will, standing up. "I play a mean banjo. My Uncle Balthazar taught me how. Of course," he added thoughtfully, "he also taught me the flamenco and he never walked again after that..."

"Gods, we are so screwed," muttered Lou Ellen.

"Someone get me a banjo," Will said, taking another swig of his drink. He turned to Cecil. "I don't suppose you managed to stuff one into your bag, by any chance?"

Cecil shook his head mutely.

"Does anyone here have a banjo?" Will called towards the inhabitants of the Saloon. They gave no indication that they did. "Hmm. Seems we hit a snag," Will muttered.

"Um, why don't you just share the one banjo?" Lou Ellen asked.

Croony eyes bugged from his skull. "Are ya barkin'? A man never shares his banjo with another man!"

"Ooh, I've got an idea!" Croony gasped. "How about we mime that we're playing them banjos and sing the song instead. That'll make it equally unfair."

Will stared at him for a second, considering, and then said, "Er, okay. That sounds reasonable." A chorus of groans and moans sounded from behind him.

"Oh Gods," said Cecil. "Will, you can't possibly do this. Your singing is too- too..."

Will turned and winked at his friends. "Trust me guys," he whispered, "it won't matter if I win or lose. By the end he'll be begging to take us to the Labyrinth."

"Alrighty then," Will said. He took a final swig of his drink, spilling it down his front, and then tossed it to the side. "I'll start." With that, Will burst into a metal version of Phantom of the Opera.

In that moment it was discovered that the dead people in the room were more than capable of hearing, as all of them clapped their hands over their ears and cringed, perhaps assuming Armageddon was upon them.

"Oh my gods!" Lou Ellen screamed over the wailing. "Why couldn't Nico just beat him up? It would have been less painful for everyone involved."

"Kids got a powerful set o' vocal chords," Croony growled to himself. He flinched as Will
somehow managed to hit the high note at the end, although it sounded like he was ripping all of his vocal chords out of their sockets. His voice faded into an agonized silence. "And that's how it's done," he rasped. "Grab a napkin, Croony, you just got served."

"What is happening?" Croony groaned painfully clutching at the sides of his head. "I think I've gone deaf..."

"Ha!" Will rasped, pleased with himself. "Do you forfeit? Because I'd be happy to continue- I've got the Opera from The Fifth Element under my belt as well! And Barbie Girl, and What Does the Fox Say?!"

Croony recoiled in horror as Will burst into the opera from The Fifth Element. "No! For the love of Gods, stop!" He cringed again as Will crescendo-ed into the chorus. "OKAY! I'll take ya to the damn mountains kid! Just SHUT UP!"

Will spluttered to a strangled halt in the middle of the song. "Really?" he rasped.

Croony sighed. "Yes. I didn't even want to go to the competition that bad... Just stop that infernal racket."

"Oh." Will muttered. "Good. Yes, that's great."

"Be ready to go in the morning." Croony growled. "I'll see ya at six."

Will turned back to Nico, Lou Ellen, Cecil, Simonides, and Plato, all of whom were still clutching their heads. "And that's how it's done," he croaked again with a small grin. It faded rather quickly as another thought struck him.

"Guys, I still have to pee."

After a day of fighting off birds, trekking through the Underworld, and facing off with a goth cowboy, and finally locating a bathroom, Will had never been so excited to get some sleep in his life. The world greyed as he lay there, listening to Nico's soft breathing in the bed next to his...

It was sundown and he was running, running as if the very stars depended on it though he knew not why nor where. A massive coliseum unfolded before him, built into the rough stone of the cliffs. Rows of emerald tents stood pitched around the perimeter, merchants selling trinkets and miscellaneous items. The roar of the crowd reached his ears, echoing off the stadium seating.

"Move!" He screamed, shoving his way through the throngs of people. He couldn't get there fast enough, and the terror blinded him, or perhaps it was the tears beading in his eyes... He reached the gate in time to see the armored figure in yellow fall to the sand in the center of the arena. A man was standing on the marble balcony far above the arena, his arm outstretched. His skin glistened in the light of the cold sun, and the image of electric green reptilian eyes flashed through behind his eyes. He twisted his hand, angling his thumb toward the arena floor.

"No!" He screamed, but his voice was overpowered in the roar of hundreds. He leapt forward, managed to get one leg onto the stone wall, before he was yanked backwards by the guards. He was screaming, writhing against the muscular arms that held him... he couldn't watch it, couldn't bear it...

"Will?" A voice gasped and he looked over. A girl, strawberry blonde hair in braids, a mirror at her hip. Lou Ellen was gaping at him in shock, like she was seeing a ghost...

His dream changed.
A woman stood in the center of a dark room. Blonde hair spilled down her shoulders, framing a pale face and large blue eyes. Her suit was rumpled, the lotus flower tucked into her pocket dried and brittle. Standing alone in a dark cave, Agnete looked faded and frail, a piece of paper crumpled and tossed aside.

"Python grows impatient," a voice snarled. "He demands the powers of the Oracle, and we will be next if we don't deliver. Tell me you have brought it with you."

"I couldn't!" She shouted, taking a small step backwards. "Not with Zeus breathing down my neck. I was forced to feed him a tale about his son skipping town until he was treated with respect, but I don't know how long he'll buy it. He's beginning to suspect me."

"How long?" A soft unamused laugh echoed through the cave. "Not long at all, when Hermes comes clean to him. Retrieve it, and bring it at once. I will deal with Zeus."

"I can't. I don't have it anymore." Agnete whispered. "I sent it ahead with the boy. I believe he hopes to bring it to his accursed father in an attempt to save his life."

"You what?!" The voice detonated angrily and Agnete spun around frantically, searching for the speaker. "Have you lost your mind?"

"He comes to you willingly, Master, even now," Agnete said quickly. "It would be a gift, beyond what he ever hoped. Delivering both father and son would guarantee his favor for us."

"Us?" The voice grated on the rock walls. "Yes, our favor, but not yours Agnete. I care not what Python intends to do with you, as long as you continue to disobey the simplest of orders. Python has nearly cracked Apollo, and the festivals will begin in six days time..."

Will awoke in the dark, shivering feverishly in cold sweat. His heart pounded as he lay there, staring at the ceiling. His mind raced. Images of electric green eyes and a fallen hero collapsed into the dirt in an arena, the final sunset blooming on the horizon. Will rolled over onto his side so that he faced Nico, who was laying in the opposite bed.

Part of him wanted to wake him up at once, and tell him everything he had just seen. He sat up and was about to do so when he paused. He took in the sight of him, curled into a ball, covers pulled up to his chin, breathing softly in the still darkness. For once in his life he looked peaceful, not troubled by the nightmares that liked to follow him into bed. Will lay back down, and watched him for a time, lost in the rise and fall of his breath, trying not to imagine his father at the mercies of a giant serpent.

Nico POV

A foot kick the bed Nico was sleeping on, followed by the sound of Will's voice.

"Nico wake up."

He ignored it.

Instead he rolled over and pressed his face into his pillow, breathing in the delicious scent of Tide Liquid Clean Breeze and Underworld Ghost Town. He smiled contentedly. It was times like these, burrowed into pillows and blankets like a tapeworm, that he wondered how he ever felt sad. If he could find a way to stay in a bed of fluffy pillows and blankets for the rest of his life, he'd be complete...

Kick.
"Get up Nico."

His life in a mattress fortress sounded impossibly good. Hmm… but how would he take care of himself? He could shadow travel food to himself, or better yet, hire a slave to do it. He snorted into his pillow at the simplicity of it. Easy-peasy.

Kick.

"Rise and Shine, Death Boy."

Who did he know who was a good cook? Percy always had delicious blue cookies, but Nico doubted he had made them himself. Besides… what he really wanted was fries. It still caused pain in his heart to recall the day he found out McDonald's didn't deliver. Actually, that was probably the heartburn, but still... He should ask Will to look into it…

Kick.

"Get up Ichabod."

Nico grinned into his pillow as he imagined Blondie's assured rage that would fly when he found out just how much McDonald's Nico ate. Oh yes, he'd be infuriated and horrified. Imagine if I enslaved him and made him bring me all kinds of unhealthy things, he thought gleefully. Yes, it was the perfect solution: he would enslave his Blondie. Nico looked forward to it. Ah... the simple pleasures in life!

"Up and at 'em di Angelo! It's almost time to leave. Croony's waiting for us with the horses." Nico heard the curtains whip open and felt light flood the room.

To counteract the sudden brightness, his thoughts took a darker turn. How would he use the bathroom? Every time he plotted to stay in bed, eventually his bladder turned on him. They would have a fierce battle of wills, until eventually Nico gave up and gave in. It was basically the tragedy of his life...

Great. Now he had to pee.

"Death Boy, if you don't get up right now I will make you. And trust me, no one wants that."

Nico's only response was to groan as loudly as he could and bury his face in his pillow with the reasoning of an ostrich.

"You sound like Chewbacca in heat," Will told him.

"That's what I was going for," Nico mumbled into his pillow, trying to shove away the mental image. The words were so muffled however, he doubted even the pillow understood him.

"I mean it. Get up."

Nico didn't move. "Make me," he snarled at his pillow.

And make him, he did.

With a battle cry that gave Tarzan a run for his money, Will ran and jumped onto the bed. While annoyed, that in itself was not enough to make Nico show signs of life.

Then Will grabbed him around the waist and tickled him.
"AAARGHH!" Nico sprung up and kicked his leg out wildly. He felt his foot make contact and heard Will yelp, followed by an unmistakable clunk as he toppled off the bed.

There was five seconds of silence and then;

"Oh GODS!" Will screamed. "Why me?"

"Solace!" Nico yelled angrily. There was no answer and he peered over the side of the bed to see Will curled up on the ground, eyes streaming and groaning loudly. Nico's eyes widened when he saw where he was clutching himself.

"Oh," he muttered. "Yikes."

"You've killed me," Will croaked. "I'm ended."

"I'm sorry," Nico whined. "I was aiming for your head."

"You missed."

Nico felt his face heat up.

Will looked at the wall for a moment and didn't answer. "I think I just felt something re-ascend," he whispered hollowly.

Nico groaned and rolled over, yanking the sheets over his head.

"Hey Nico?"

"I'm not getting up yet Solace!" Nico groaned.

"But there's a-"

"NO! You can't make me!"

"That's not what I'm saying! There's a-"

"Eat hardtack Solace!"

"Nico, there's a huge spider on you!"

Nico froze. Slowly he turned his head to and peered around. There, on the fluffy white sheets, was a massive black spider, about the size of a soccer ball. They stared at each other for a second, sizing each other up. Nico reached out his finger and wiggled it at it.

"Well hello there, little cutie -ARRGGHH!" He screamed as the spider sunk its fangs into him.

"Nico!" Will watched in horror as Nico danced around on top of the bed, screaming and shaking his hand. "Oh Gods, get it off!" Nico shrieked, flailing around wildly. "Get it off, get it off, get it-!"

"Why did you try to pet it?" Will yelled tearing at his hair. He hobbled over to his bag and yanked out his large metal flashlight. "Take that!" he screamed, smacking at the spider. The feeble hit failed to dislodge it however.

"Harder!" Nico screamed, jumping up and down on the cot so that the bed springs creaked alarmingly. "Get it!" He yelled and Will swung at it with flashlight. He watched as Will completely missed the spider, and instead held his hand out for the flashlight yelling, "Give it to me, Blondie!"
Will chucked the flashlight at him. He miss-judged and it sailed clear over Nico's head. "Solace!" He groaned in frustration.

"I'm sorry Nico!" Will shouted. "You're smaller than I thought!" He watched in horror as the spider rushed at Nico, hissing and spitting in anger. Nico tripped backwards off the bed.

"Will!" He screamed in terror, shoving himself backwards across the floor in his attempt to get away from the spider.

"Hang on Nico!" Will screamed. "I'M COMING!" He ran forward and kicked at the creature with his shoe. With a clatter of a thousand tiny legs, hundreds of baby spiders scuttled from it's back.

"AAHHH!" They both screamed in unison.

"Oh Gods," Nico moaned in a terror-overhaul, "they're everywhere!" He and Will ran and jumped back onto the bed in their attempt to escape.

They both collapsed, panting, watching in horror as the hundreds of spiders dispersed across the room.

"I'm so over this place," Nico gasped. Will nodded in agreement, his heart racing.

At that moment Lou Ellen's voice rang from the other side of the door. "Is everything okay? It sounds like you're getting freaky in there. Should I come back later?"

Nico and Will looked at each other.

The saloon looked almost exactly as it had the night before. Not a single person had moved and the only difference was the spider now wore an apron with a clover leaf that said Kiss Me I'm Irish.

"Top o' the mornin' to ya'll!" he clackled. "Yer just in time fer breakfasst. It's Irish Tuesday!"

"Oh, gee..." Lou Ellen gagged, "I think we're good Sir. That hardtack really hit the spot last night."

"Yeah," muttered Cecil. "I can literally feel it sitting in my stomach." He raised his voice, "It's alright, I think it's time we head off."

Simonides looked sad. "Ya'll are leavin' already?" He sighed and held out a small paper bag that exhumed an awful stench. "Well, at least accept this haggis. It's my specialty. I even fried it in some Cod Liver Oil, it really brings out the juices. If the hardtack didn't kill ya this will."

Lou Ellen took it silently and gagged, pinching her nose.

"I thought haggis is Scottish?" asked Cecil.

"Tha's never bin proven!" Simonides hissed. A sudden ruckus of muffled shouting from outside made everyone freeze.

"This is absurd!" Shouted a gruff male voice which Nico recognized as Croony's. "Why should I have ta take a bunch o' little kids up into the mountains? Them fallin' rocks will crush their little spines!"

Nico exchanges startled looks with Will, Cecil, and Lou Ellen.

"Ah yes," Simonides sighed. "That'll be Croony. He's can be a bit sullen, but I think you'll find him a hoot an' a half. You'll have ta ask him ta play his banjo fer ya en sing a song. He's got a lovely
Simonides motioned for them to follow him outside. "Come on. I'll see ya off."

Croony was outside, wearing his usual black leather outfit, surrounded by six horses. One was clearly a pack horse, covered in bags and of course, a banjo case. Five of them were regular horses. The sixth one was a smaller pony, pitch black in color with an obsidian horn spiraling from between his eyes.

"Now, hold up Croony, a deal's a deal," Plato was saying as they stepped outside. "Besides they're not that small. They won't hold ya up, I promise. I've been talkin' to 'em, they seem like real sweet kids."

"Are you sure?" asked Croony, eyeing Nico up. "This one here's a midget."

Nico scowled and stepped forward. "Who are you callin' a midget?" Will grabbed his arm and pulled him back before he got beat up.

"Let's get to it folks," Croony said gruffly, staring a them with his eye-linered grey eyes. "Little Guy," he pointed at Nico, "you'll be riding Pomegranate." He pointed at the black unicorn.

Nico glared at him outraged. "Why do I have to ride the unicorn?" he growled.

Croony raised an eyebrow. "I'm the guide so I make the rules. Now get on the damn unicorn Sugarplum. We don't got all day."

Will grinned and leaned toward Nico. "Do you prefer Sugarplum over Death Boy? Because I'm willing to compromise."

Nico scowled at him. "Don't you dare Solace."

They each took a horse and mounted. Pomegranate skittered nervously when the son of Hades approached him, but he was able to climb on after a small battle of wills.

"Now what?" Will asked when they were all situated.

"Now we ride." Croony growled. "Into yonder mountains and colder weather."
Chapter Eight:

Tartarus Rising

(Part 1/2)

Nico cracked an eye open in time to see a large, furry, whiskery muzzle try to nibble on his nose. Wonderful. Now his horse wanted to eat him.

By the time they reached the cold highlands at the foot of the mountains he could, at the very least, cross off 'getting-bucked-off-a-rampaging-unicorn' from his bucket list. It wasn't like he hated animals. The only horse he'd ever ridden before was Blackjack, and that was only after Percy had basically forced him to accept Nico as a nice son of Hades. Be friends. Or else.

Overall, Nico didn't mind animals all that much as long as they maintained a weary understanding of mutual discomfort towards each other.

But the little creature under him now, Pomegranate, was clearly a primitive beast with feral tendencies towards his rider and a passion for dead grass which Nico figured would have to go eternally unquenched.

After several nasty falls, in which Pomegranate stopped stubbornly to chomp on the shrubbery and then bolted forward in a delighted contortion of bucking to catch up to his friends, Nico was ready to simply dismount and walk. The final straw was when a skeletal chipmunk chittered across their path. Pomegranate looked at it for a count of three seconds and then promptly concluded it was the most frightening beast he'd ever witnessed.

A second later Nico found himself on the ground with a unicorn, a chipmunk, and a son of Apollo staring down at him in varying degrees of amusement.

"Nico are you okay?" Will gasped, eyes big and blue with concern (he was the least amused). He stared down at him from where he sat on his own strawberry roan stallion, Sunrise.

Nico shoved himself up off the ground with a pained snarl.

"No, I am not okay Solace!" He spat dirt from his mouth and glared distastefully at the little black pony who was now ripping more blades of grass from the ground and chomping serenely. "I'm riding a unicorn through Elysium with you as company. How could I possibly be okay?"

Will ignored his last comment. "I meant, are you hurt?" he asked and then, to Nico's growing discontentment, dismounted and ran over to the son of Hades.

"Of course I'm not hurt!" Nico snapped, brushing away his attempts to look him over for injuries. "I'm riding a unicorn through Elysium with you as company. How could I possibly be okay?"

Will raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure? You're both tiny."

Nico glared at him and he sighed. "Death Boy, I suck at absolutely everything and yet even I can ride a horse. If you really are fine, stop complaining and get back on yours."

"No. You can't make me." Nico sniffed. "I don't see why I should have to ride this... creature. He's
pig-headed and spiteful. And glutinous. And his brain is the size of a pea." Once he felt the pony was thoroughly insulted, he crossed his arms and sat criss-cross on the grass, hoping someone would feel sorry for him.

Ten yards ahead, Croony turned in his saddle to look back at him. "Yes Laddie, I thought you two would be well-suited for each other."

Nico ground his teeth together. "My brain is not the size of a pea."

"Of course it's not," Will said hurriedly, although his face was suspiciously void of expression. He eyed Nico who still hadn't budged and asked, "Death Boy, do you need help getting on again?"

"I did not need help before!"

Will looked dubious. "Really? Because I seem to recall that you had to shadow travel onto his back. Which," he added, "earns you another three days in the infirmary when we get back."

"You can't be serious!" Nico said in disbelief. "I'm allowed to shadow travel us into the Underworld, but when I move myself three feet I get three days?!"

"It was unnecessary." Will said sternly. "I offered to give you a leg up."

"There's no way in Hades you are going to pick me up Solace." Nico hurriedly stood up and stomped back over to Pomegranate. "Couldn't we have at least taken pegasi? They're far more intelligent than normal horses!"

Croony turned in his saddle to glare at the four demigods riding behind him. Lou Ellen was clutching at the withers of her dapple grey mare, Suzan, watching anxiously as the horses ears pricked forward at the sight of a suspicious weed sprouting from the ground. Cecil alone looked at ease on his chestnut gelding, Dewdrop, as he tripped obliviously over a bear trap.

"Trust me, ya'll don't want to be flyin' up in those winds." Croony snapped as Nico climbed back onto Pomegranate. "It's too risky and these horses are built for climbin'. They'll serve us far better than any winged critter will. We'll stop and make camp when it starts getting dark, an' then we'll be off bright an' early in the mornin'. The village is only a little farther up the trail, but I don't want to risk traveling during the night. Not with the forest so near."

They followed his gaze to the left, where the statues of dark willows and elms knotted from the blanket of soft snow. An eerie fog seemed to permeate deep in the depths, jeweled by the dance of soft lights. Nico was reminded of fireflies.

"Why? What's in the forest?"

Croony grinned crookedly at Will, yellow teeth catching the dull light. "It's not just any ol' forest, Sugarplum. You may know it better as the Veil of Mourning, or the Weeping Woods if you prefer. That's what the Shamans call them. It's where the souls of those whom died unhappy in love dwell, although lately it's been attracting a lot o' unfriendlier spirits. Ya feel the ground tremblin' like that? The attacks are getting mo' frequent. It's a nasty place. Best we be stayin' out of it."

"I've heard of that place." Nico frowned thoughtfully at the forest. "It's full of Oread. Mountain Spirits. They try to guide passerby astray with the lights, tricking them into thinking they're lost loved-ones. Normally they're friendly, but I doubt the Underworld ones are."

"Aye." Croony acknowledged. "Best to keep our distance then eh? The last thing I need is to have another weapons delivery stolen."
"Weapons?" Nico asked in alarm. "Why are you bringing these snow shaman weapons? I thought you said the Shamans are peaceful."

Croony shrugged carelessly. "They're always askin' fer more weapons now that Gaea's been defeated, but I pay no mind to 'em. It's good business. They're just a bunch o' star-readin' hippies who like to watch the birds and spread rumors about oncoming wars."

"They think a war is coming?" Lou Ellen asked. "In Elysium?"

"Well that's why it's funny, now, ain't it?" Croony grinned at her. "Bunch o' silly mount'an people..." He rambled on quietly and then looked sharply at Will. "You'll like them Sugarplum. The whole lot o' 'em are healers. Of course, they're more interested in their herbs and potions, but I daresay you'll find 'em entertainin' enough."

"What happened on your last delivery?" Will asked. "You said it was stolen?"

"Oh yes." Croony growled, the amusement fading from his voice. "Like ah said, attacks are becoming more frequent up here. It's nothin' we can't handle o' course, I mean, we're already dead for Hades' sake. It is a little unnerving though. But no monster is gonna get the better o' me, ya hear?" Croony snarled towards the ground. "In my father's name, I'll put them in their places!"

"You're a demigod?" Will asked, wondering what god would give birth to a Goth cowboy. "Who is your father?"

"Orcus o' course." Croony said proudly. "God o' eternal punishment and broken oaths."

"How lovely," muttered Lou Ellen, but Nico's head snapped up at the name.

Another image came to mind, one that took place in a small South Carolina meadow, facing off against another one of Orcus' descendants, with Reyna and Coach Hedge at his side... bile rose in his throat and for a moment he thought he was going to be sick. He clutched at Pomegranate's mane to steady himself.

"Are you okay?"

Nico looked over to see Will frowning at him, his eyebrows drawn together in concern. Nico nodded mutely, not trusting himself to speak, and forced himself to relax. All he could do was hope that Croony didn't realize his role in his brother's death.

"Hey guys?" Will murmured quietly.

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil looked at him curiously.

"I need to tell you something." Will said, low enough so Croony wouldn't hear them. "Just not... here. Later, okay?"

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil looked at him, startled, but didn't push.

So Will didn't seem inclined to trust their guide either, which was fine by Nico... He forced the thought from his head, but as they continued riding deeper into the mountains, Nico couldn't help but watch Croony out of the corner of his eye.

They rode deep into the mountains, winding along rocky cliffs that made Nico want to regurgitate his hardtack. The wind howled loudly in his ears, making the back of his neck prickle. In the distance, the sun was sinking into the horizon, bathing Elysium in waves of red and pink. The
colors reflected on the frozen grass, coloring the entire mountainside in soft pastels. They seemed to move and dance in the wind.

"We'll camp here for the night," Croony shouted over the gusting wind, drawing his horse to a halt. Nico looked around in surprise. As the sun dropped, the shadows of the tree trunks lengthened grotesquely casting images on the ground. He peered into the woods, regretting it immediately, when faces seemed to hover in the fog. He looked away, heart beating rapidly.

"But we're still by the forest!" Lou Ellen shouted. "I thought we were trying to get away from it before we stopped!"

"We'll have to make do." Croony dismounted and began removing bags from the pack-horse. "Now get over here and help set up camp! Lou-Lou, or, whatever your name is, get a fire started."

"It's Lou!" she shouted.

The four of them exchanged miserable looks and dismounted.

Nico and Cecil worked on untacking the horses, while Will and Croony set up a tent. Lou chanted something under her breath and before long, a large purple fire was burning, sending colorful sparks into the darkness. It hovered in the air, about six inches off the ground, impervious to the gusting winds.

Cecil eyed the small tent that Croony and Will were struggling to set up against the wind. "That doesn't look big enough for us all."

"It's bigger on the inside Laddie."

"Like a Tardis!" Will exclaimed excitedly, nearly whacking himself on the head with the support-pole he was holding.

"A what?" Croony asked loudly, grabbing it from him before he could skewer himself with it.

"A Tardis!"

"You what?"

"No! A Tardis!"

"That's offensive! You shouldn't use that word Laddie!"

"What? No! That's not what I- It's from a TV show! You can find it on Netflix!" Will was met with four blank stares and he gave up. "You guys are so uncultured."

"I'm dead," Croony snapped. "Pardon me for not having Netflix in the Underworld."

"What are you talking about?" Nico asked him. "Reception in the Underworld is great! I have Netflix. I just pestered my dad until he put the wifi in my room!"

Will rolled his eyes. "You don't 'put the wifi in your room' Death Boy, you'd say that he- Wait, you have a room? Like a bedroom?"

Nico shrugged. "A whole house actually."

"Really? I wanna see it!" Will shouted, far more eagerly than was socially acceptable. "I mean,
that's cool. Whatever." He gulped as Nico gave him a weird look.

"Shut yer yappin, you two." Croony growled at them. "I'm famished. Let's eat and you can tell me all about this quest o' yours."

The four of them looked darkly at each other, but took seats around the purple fire. It was profoundly warm, and Nico held his hands up to it. They ate an ironic meal of hardtack dipped in nectar (to soften it, of course, they were pros by now). Will hesitantly told their guide the general idea of their quest; they had to save Apollo. He refused to give any more information than that. It didn't seem like a good idea to go around telling everyone they met about the details, especially not a rude, goth cowboy whom had been forced to lead them into the mountains by a spider and his gay lover.

Croony nodded thoughtfully after his short explanation, and then glared darkly at Nico. "And what about you, Son of Hades? What is your sorry excuse for going with him?"

"Excuse me?"

Nico looked up at him nervously. Something in the way he said it sounded accusatory, but Nico couldn't put his finger on it. Croony's scowl deepened.

"I mean, what reason could you possibly have to justify coming on such a quest?"

"Will is my friend." Nico said quietly, not quite understanding. "Do I need another reason?"

"I would certainly hope there is a better reason than that." Croony's lip curled, the cast of the fire lighting his face in grotesque shadows. "After all, it seems a rather lacking reward for the price of betraying your family."

There was no longer any doubt that the undertone of threat colored his words. Nico was bewildered as his thoughts leapt to Hades. Was he betraying his father? Hades didn't get along with his family, but he didn't see how helping Apollo would betray him. Still, the accusation made him flush angrily.

"What are you talking about?" Nico demanded. "I haven't betrayed my family. I don't even have a family." He continued on hurriedly before Will could say something dopey like, We're your family now, Death Boy. "I mean sure, I have my dad but I don't think he'd care that much. He has no interest in me, or what I do."

Nico wasn't so sure about the last statement, however. He had been shocked when Hades turned up in the church while he was carrying the Athena Parthenos to camp, claiming he wanted his son to be an exception to their bloodlines' misery.

"Maybe that's because he doesn't know what you're up to," Croony fired back. "I don't think he'd be happy to find out that you are sneaking his nephew's son and his little friends into Elysium for this datted quest... but that is not the point. Hades is not who I was referring to." Croony narrowed his eyes angrily. "I'm speaking of your mother."

Nico froze in shock.

"My mother?"

"Aye."

Nico stared at him numbly. Croony seemed to know more than he was letting on and Nico was not
willing to humor him by begging him to explain. His mother was dead, there was no way he could betray her now... was there? He supposed he could betray her memory. He'd never thought about it before.

Will looked between Nico and Croony in confusion. "What's going on? What does Nico's mom have to do with our quest?"

Croony ignored him, and instead pointed a finger at the son of Hades. "There was something about you Mr. di Angelo, a feeling I got when I first saw you. I couldn't put my finger on it, but now I understand." Nico held his breath, heart hammering. "You're the one who murdered my brother," Croony said flatly. "It's alright Nico di Angelo. You can admit it."

Nico stared at him expressionless. He wanted to say something to defend himself, to tell his friends, Will especially, that it wasn't true. He briefly considered playing dumb, but knew he wouldn't be able to pull it off. "I didn't-"

"You what?" Croony laughed harshly. "You didn't mean to?"

Will looked between Nico and Croony, unsure about the turn in the conversation. "Okay, I don't know what's going on, but Nico would never kill anyone-"

"I'm not proud of it. I- I wasn't in control," Nico gasped faintly. "I only did what was necessary. He was going to-to-"

Croony's eyes gleamed, like an oncoming storm. "I must say I am fascinated, son of Hades, by the lengths you will go to justify what you do. I assume you can also justify the betrayal of your family for a hapless quest to save Zeus' son. I wonder, are so ashamed of who you are that you would save the son of the one who tore your family apart?"

There was a terrible silence, where everyone seemed frozen.

"Say that again," Nico said quietly, icicles dripping from his words, "and you'll find yourself alongside your brother in oblivion."

The corners of Croony's mouth turned upward but his eyes were colder than ever.

"Spoken like a true son of Hades," he murmured. "I can see your father in you, boy, dark as night. I am far older than you, Mr. di Angelo, and believe me when I say I know the fates that befall all of your father's sons. I have watched it first-hand, because most of them end up at my father's feet at one time or another."

"Don't you dare compare me to-" Nico argued weakly, but his voice was swept away as the son of Orcus spoke over him.

"You are no different from him, and no better than them," Croony growled. "Hear my words now; When your time comes, I pray you find yourself rightfully punished for the wrongs you have done."

Nico heard the blood pounding in his ears.

If Croony was trying to make him mad, it was working. If he was trying to scare him... that too was working.

The grass around Nico's feet had shriveled and died, crumbling to charcoal and blowing away in the wind. Nico was furious. He wanted to attack the son of Orcus, force him to take back the
words, throttle him with his bare hands if he had to... He stood up, feeling tendrils of death slip from his finger tips as he reached towards the son of Orcus...

"Nico!"

Warm hands closed around his, muting the cold. Nico looked over in confusion to find himself glaring into Will's blue eyes.

The son of Apollo stared at Nico with frightened eyes. Nico knew he must have looked furious but Will stood firm. Nico couldn't speak. He was too upset and he had no words to say anyways. He didn't want to see the look on any of the other's faces. They had all heard what Croony said, all knew he was a killer. The yearning to be alone crept up on him again, but Will was gripping his hand too tightly for Nico to run away. He tried to tug away, but Will wouldn't let go, and Nico felt anger spike through him.

Nico lashed out carefully with his powers, letting just enough darkness trail into his fingers to force Will to let go. He could tell Will felt it instantly; that Nico's powers far outmatched the son of Apollo's right now, that Nico was not in the mood to yield right now.

Will flinched. At the sight, Nico's heart seemed to swell painfully in his chest. For a wild moment he thought it was guilt. Then he was able to recognize it as shame.


Will hesitated before he complied, hurt etched all over his face. Nico glanced from Croony's angry expression to his three confused friends and couldn't bear it. He turned away and stomped towards the forest, hoping to find the solitude he so-craved in the gloom of the trees.

"Where are you going?" Will demanded, walking after him. "Nico, wait! You can't just wander off by yourself; it's too dangerous."

Nico ignored him and continued walking, more than aware that the son of Apollo was running after him. Nico growled under his breath. Apparently Will had learned absolutely nothing from his show of power. "Wait I'm coming with you!"

"For once in your life, stay out of it Solace!"

"No! Tell me what's wrong!" Will hesitated for a brief moment when he reached the circumference of the forest, eyeing the dim and darkness, and then charged on relentlessly.

"Leave me alone!" Nico growled, kicking savagely at a tree root.

"No! I won't leave you alone because I know what you're like; you'll wallow around in your own misery and guilt, letting it eat you up inside until you convince yourself you're worthless and terrible," Will shouted.

Anger flooded through Nico at his words. How dare he presume to know how he felt? He knew nothing at all about Nico's past.

"Screw you."

"Are kidding me?" Will looked furious for the first time. "That's the best you can come up with? Don't you turn your back on me di Angelo!" He lunged forward and grabbed Nico's hand again, forcing him to face him. Nico snarled angrily.
"Let go of me!"

"Why?" Will demanded. "Why won't you even talk to me?"

"Because I don't want you to get hurt Solace!"

"Oh please, you're not going to hurt me," Will yelled. "Don't act like you're protecting me. I can handle myself."

"Maybe I can't!" Nico shouted miserably. "That's the whole point! Do you not remember Octavian? Leo? I have hurt people. It's what I do."

"I'm sure you didn't mean to-"

"You're right! I didn't mean to. I can't even control my own powers!" Nico felt utterly exhausted suddenly. To his right he noticed a fallen log, and he sunk down on it, his voice lowering. "I may not want to hurt you, Will, but that may not be enough. Everything Croony said was true, about his brother. I know you aren't afraid of me, but you weren't there when I… You've never seen me like that."

"Like what exactly?" Will asked, moving to sit by him. His arm brushed again Nico's and this time he did not move away, more because he didn't care about much at all in that moment, than because he didn't mind the contact.

When Nico spoke his voice was dead. "When I was bringing the Athena Parthenos to camp with Reyna and Coach Hedge, we ran into another son of Orcus. Bryce Lawrence. He was going to take us back to New Rome. He started talking about how he hoped Reyna would be executed, and he wanted to torture Coach Hedge, and I- I snapped. I lost control of my powers and I destroyed him. He's worse than dead now."

Will's expression didn't change when he asked, "What did Reyna and the Coach say about it?"

Nico shrugged. "They said it was necessary, but... I couldn't even remember any of it afterwards. I blacked out." Nico squeezed his eyes shut and leaned forward, gripping his hair in his fists. "How can I ever learn to control something like that?"

Will was silent for a moment. "I don't know, Nico," he said quietly. "But I do know that I'll try to help you if it ever gets that bad again."

"You couldn't do anything to stop it Will," Nico sighed. "You'd only get yourself hurt."

Will sighed and took his hand, somewhat dramatically. "Nico, it's times like these that I like to quote someone far wiser than myself..."

"That hardly narrows it down," Nico muttered. "Is it Apollo?"

"Dumbledore," Will interrupted smartly. "Remember when he said, 'Happiness can be found even in the darkest of places, if one only remembers to turn on the light.'?"

Nico stared at him in disbelief. "No, Solace, I don't remember when he said that because I never made it past the first movie."

"WHAT?" Will almost screamed. "That's it Death Boy. Here's the plan; when this is all over, we are going to your underworld house, and we are going to watch all the Harry Potter movies on your superb Netflix connection that your dad put in your room."
Nico glared at him. "That's funny Will," he muttered, "because don't you think I would have watched them all if they were on Netflix?"

"Uhh..."

"They're not on Netflix," Nico said flatly.

"Seriously?" Will looked cinematically disturbed. "Those savages!"

"Tell me about it," Nico sighed. "I blacked out and blew up my computer in rage when I found out."

Will stared at him.

"I'm kidding," Nico muttered.

They sat together in comfortable silence for a moment.

"Hey Nico?"

"What?"

"Why did Croony think saving Apollo would be a betrayal?"

Nico hesitated. He was loathe to talk about his past, but Will had helped him this far... Nico took a deep breath and then said bluntly, "Zeus killed my family out of spite when my father wouldn't give me and my sister over to him. I guess Croony thinks they wouldn't be impressed that I'm trying to save Zeus' son now."

"I didn't know that," Will said quietly, watching Nico intently. "So what made you decide to come?"

"You did," Nico murmured softly. "You would have done the same for me. And someone's got to keep you out of trouble."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pressure you to come-"

"You didn't," Nico said hurriedly. "I wanted to."

Will looked thoughtful staring down at his hands. For once Nico was glad the son of Apollo was with him. The night air was freezing Will was practically radiating warmth. He resisted the urge to scoot closer to him.

"Hey Nico?" Will said softly.

There was something in his voice made Nico look at him sharply. His eyes were brighter and bluer than ever in the moonlight, and they were fixed on Nico.

"There- there's something I want to tell you, and I- I don't know how you'll feel about it," Will murmured. He fidgeted nervously and looked down.

To Nico's surprise Will reached out and took one of his hands.

Something about Will was acting made the skeletal butterflies begin fluttering in his stomach again. He followed his gaze down to their clasped hands, unsure if he should let go. He didn't want to; Will's hands were incredibly warm, wrapped around his, a feeling he was slowly coming to
enjoy. Luckily Will didn't seem to want to let go either. Nico's knuckles were bruised and scabbed over from hours of sword practice. He had once tried pouring nectar over them, but not even that had been enough to erase them.

At least, that's what he had thought.

Will traced his thumb slowly over the skin, making Nico shiver. He watched in faint awe as the marks slowly began to fade. They weren't gone completely, they never would be, but they were significantly softer.

"Will..." He looked up at him, at a loss for words. The flecks of gold in Will's eyes caught the light, and Nico stared at them mesmerized.

"Hang on. Let me finish," Will said nervously. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Nico watched him, beginning to feel breathless. He could feel Will's nervousness rubbing off on him, his heart speeding up.

Will continued haltingly."I- I understand if you don't feel the same way, but, uh-" Believe me no one feels the way I do about you, Nico thought. "But I feel like I should tell you, before it gets... stronger."

Will seemed to be struggling with what he wanted to say, but all Nico could think of was how close they were to each other. He could count all the smallest freckles on Will's face, and for some reason he noticed a single one at the corner of his mouth... why was thinking about that now? Will was trying to tell him something, he should be listening to him, not staring at his mouth...

"...I just wanted to say that I-" Will started again, "Nico, I really like-"

A loud clattering made them both jump violently. They turned to see Cecil and Lou Ellen walking towards them. Nico drew away from Will, feeling strangely disappointed.

"Hey guys, what's going on?" Will asked them, recovering quickly.

Cecil shrugged. "You guys were taking forever so we decided to come check on you. Lou and I figured you were either running away, or that the two of you were out here-," Lou Ellen smacked his arm before he could finish.

"Of course were not running away," Will muttered glumly.

"So what's the plan?" Cecil looked kindly at Nico. "If you like we can go back and cut Croony's throat! I'll grab him from behind and hold him down, and then you can-,"

"Stop it Cecil!" Lou Ellen exclaimed. "We came out here because you said you wanted to tell us something earlier, away from Croony. Which," she added, "I'm beginning to think was a really good idea. I have a bad feeling about that guy."

"I'd be worried if you didn't," Will said. "I had another dream last night."

"You did?" Nico asked in surprise. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I didn't really have a chance," Will muttered. He quickly told them about his dream, about Agnete, about the fallen hero in the coliseum. "...so Agnete is definitely not just working for the God's, and whoever she is working for is definitely working with Python himself. I can't help but feel like this whole thing is a trap."
"Then we'll just have to be prepared," Nico said firmly. "Do you have any idea who the person was that was in the arena?"

Will shook his head. "No. The dream changed too soon." He hesitated and then added, "There was a sun emblem on the shield though… you don't think-" Will gulped, "-you don't think that Python would force him to participate in the games, do you?"

"I don't know, Will," Nico said quietly. "But we're going to save your father. Nothing is going to happen to him."

"What if something already has?" Will demanded. "Whoever Agnete was speaking with said we'd both be sacrifices."

"That's not gonna happen," Cecil said firmly. "Did anything else happen in your dream?"

Will shook his head.

"Are you sure?" Cecil asked with a slight smile. "Nothing else? You didn't, say, suffocate Nico with a snake or something?"

"No!" Will snapped blushing brightly.


"Cecil!" Lou Ellen smacked him again, but they were both giggling.

"I don't get it. How's that funny?" Nico asked in confusion. Three faces stared at him in something akin to pity.

Lou Ellen frowned thoughtfully. "You know, maybe we should contact camp. Everyone is probably worried about us, and Chiron should know what is happening. We left with no explanation or warning. Annabeth might know something about the Labyrinth as well. We should talk with her."

"That's a good idea," said Cecil. He glanced around the dark forest and shuddered. "This place is creepy. We should head back."

He, Lou Ellen, and Will stood up to go back to the camp, but Nico hesitated.

"Are you coming Nico?" Cecil asked.

"I'll follow you," Nico muttered. "I'm not eager to see Croony again. Just give me a minute. You guys go ahead, I'll catch up."

"Are you sure?" Will asked nervously, glancing at the thickening fog that was creeping towards them.

Nico nodded. "I like the dark Will. And the Underworld. I'll be fine. I just want to be alone for a minute."

Will nodded slowly. Nico watched as the three of them receded back the way they had come, eventually disappearing into the mist. Then he was alone.

It was true that he didn't mind the darkness. The forest was silent, but he heard the distant howl of the wind above the trees. The fog on the other hand, was a little unsettling, and he stood up. He started after his three friends, slowly.
Something caught his attention in the forest. The mist was twisting sinisterly and he slowed his pace, unsure. He stopped dead when it raveled into a defined shape.

It was a girl, no older than twelve, with long, straight black hair and dark gleaming eyes. She wore a silver coat that caught the moonlight. An elegantly carved bow was slung over her shoulder and a small hunting knife tucked into her belt. A floppy green hat sat crookedly on her head. Her whole being glimmered like a mirage in the fog.

"Bianca?" Nico whispered. He took a step forward and stopped. It couldn't be her, his sister was dead, long passed into another life.

"Hello Nico," she said. "I've missed you so much." She tried to walk towards him but stopped when she reached the edge of the mist. Nico moved away, shaking his head.

"You're dead," he murmured. "Bianca's dead. You're not her. You're just a trick of the forest."

Bianca smiled sadly. "It is no trick Nico," she said. "You were always so sad, thinking I had abandoned you, left you alone in this world. You have been so strong. I have watched you struggle through horrors most heroes couldn't dream of. I saw you fight through Tartarus, I have seen the pain you have taken upon yourself. It is a burden no one should have to carry. Let me help you; let me take it from you." She stretched out her arm, reaching for him. Her fingers tips dissolved as they hit the moonlight.

"Take it from me?" Nico asked in confusion. He shook his head at his sister. "You can't help me anymore. You're gone!" He felt tears prickling in the back of his eyes.

Around him the mist shimmered, more figures appearing, but he couldn't seem to drag his eyes away from his sister. "Nico?" He heard a voice calling his name dimly, somewhere behind him from the direction he'd come from.

Bianca's eyes drifted over his shoulder and widened. "You must come with me," she said urgently. "Take my hand, brother. Stay with me." She reached out further, but her hand dissolved completely and she withdrew it slightly.

"Stay with you?" Nico shook his head in disbelief. "You chose rebirth, and you didn't even say goodbye! You could never stay with me!"

"Nico!" The voice was growing closer.

"It was my mistake, Nico" Bianca begged. "Nico please! Don't leave me in these woods alone. I can't bear it."

Nico stared at her, torn between decisions. "I don't want to lose you again…"

Bianca nodded. "I know, it's why I came back for you. Take my hand; we can be together again."

The woods were full of figures now; the shimmered around him in a spectral light, moving ever closer. His thoughts seemed to narrow with them, until he was only aware of Bianca's hand, reaching for him… he was reminded of the day when Percy had reached out to him from Tartarus. He'd been too far away then, unable to do anything. He never wanted to feel that way again.

"Nico stop!" Someone screamed. It sounded like Will.

Bianca's expression was strained. He knew what it was like to be forgotten, abandoned in the darkness. He'd be no better than anyone else if he let his sister down…
Nico reached out to take her hand-

"NICO!"

A sharp twang broke the quiescence and a second later and arrow split the mist, right where Bianca had been. Nico leapt back with a strangled cry. His sister stumbled back, staring down to where the arrow had passed straight through her chest.

"Bianca!" Nico shouted. He ran forward, but at that moment she looked back up. Her face was contorted demonically, and he caught a glimpse of fangs before she exploded into the depths of the fog with a ghastly screech. The arrow thudded into a tree trunk twenty yards out.

He turned to see Will, white-faced with shock, holding his bow in his hand. Lou Ellen and Cecil sprinted past him, shouting as they ran at Nico. It took him a minute to understand why. When he looked around he was completely surrounded by the spectral beings swimming in the fog. He drew his sword just in time, as one flew at him.

He swung his sword wildly, slicing straight through its midriff. Normally the Stygian Iron would have vaporized anything, even ghosts, instantly, but this time the fog simply faded only to reform again.

Lou Ellen arrived next to him, knife drawn and gasping. One of the figures charged at her, and her palm sparked. She hurled a ball of orange fire at it and it exploded into dust, sizzling at the impact.

"The light!" she screamed. "They don't like the light!"

It was a valid conclusion, but she was the only one who could summon her own little fire balls.

"Perfect," Nico muttered, knowing he wouldn't be able to do much with his own powers. He slashed at another tendril, only for it to fade and reform again.

"Lou!" Cecil shouted. She turned to see him holding out a branch at her. She understood immediately and lit the tip with magic. "Thanks!" Cecil swung the burning branch at the fog in a wide arch.

There were too many of them. That was apparent as Nico looked into the trees and saw the expanse of mist, stretching out endlessly. Lou Ellen fought viciously, hurling various spells which lit up the entire glade in colorful flashes, but Nico could tell she was tiring.

Another arrow flew past Nico's left ear and he ducked out of the line of fire. The arrows only seemed to anger the… whatever the hell they were, and Will must have realized it too, because he suddenly appeared next to them, slinging his bow back over his shoulder. He drew his sword, but his stance was all off. Nico's heart turned at the sight, knowing how much Will hated using a sword.

"Guys!" Nico screamed. He held out his hands and no one argued. He concentrated, trying to melt into the darkness, but he felt sluggish, like the shadows had turned on him, rising to create a barrier. He strained harder against it, pushing desperately and felt it give.

He regretted it instantly.

If the ghosts hated the light, than they must have loved the dark, because that's precisely where they all were. As his surroundings faded away, the figures became clearer, brighter than ever and leapt at him. Nico felt their frozen hands on him, hooking under his skin in icy tendrils. The sensation was so unpleasant that he yanked away from them, yanked away from the shadows…
and found himself and his three friends on the ground in the same place they had started. They were still surrounded.

Nico scrambled to his feet, shaking violently.

"What happened?" Cecil yelled. Nico shook his head in answer, forgetting that Cecil was too busy fighting to be looking at him. Will pulled his backpack from his shoulder, dropped to the ground and began feverishly looking through it.

"What are you doing?" Lou Ellen shrieked, ducking under a blow. Will didn't answer. She summoned another ball of flames, but it looked weaker than the previous and it missed entirely. She swore. "That was my last one."

Nico wondered if he should try to shadow travel again. The idea sounded awful, and his skin crawled as he remembered how it had felt the previous time. They didn't have any other option; there was nowhere to run, they couldn't hide, and the ghosts were impervious to their weapons. Nico's own powers were only feeding their strength, all the while exhausting him.

He was about to attempt it one last time, when a blinding light flooded the woods.

"Aargh!" Lou Ellen flinched, shielding her eyes. Nico had no idea what was happening and he tried vainly to keep fighting. It was no use; he was blinded by waves of light and heat. He dropped his sword, falling to his knees, and clenched his eyes shut, waiting tensely for it to end, to feel the ghosts drag him into the ether, or whatever they planned to do to him, but nothing happened.

After several seconds the light dimmed and he was able to look up. Blinking stars out of his eyes, he was stunned by what he saw.

Will stood alone in the middle of the small glade, shivering and glassy-eyed. He clutched a small vial in his hand. Light and warmth still radiated from it. The heat seared into Nico, to the point where he thought he would be blistered by it. He wondered how Will, who was holding it directly, was not burned by it. Maybe he was too shocked to notice.

"Will?" Nico whispered. He didn't answer. His expression seemed vacant, dazed like he didn't understand what was happening.

Nico tried again. "Will!"

Will jumped slightly and seemed to snap out of his daze. He shuddered harshly and looked down at the vial in his hand.

"Will what...?" Nico stared at him in shock. "What did you do?"

Will shook his head, looking shaky. "I just-" He broke off with a gasp of pain as the vial seared red-hot in his hand, a beam of light seeming to travel up his arm. Will cried out and released it, but the light heat remained. Nico's stomach lurch as it shattered on the ground. The light exploded violently from it, finally released from it's prison, and swirled around the son of Apollo as if he were a beacon. Nico tore his eyes away from it in shock as Will screamed.

"WILL!"

Nico bounded forward, trying to get to him, but the heat was agonizing. It sizzled and crackled in the air, steaming as it hit the cold. Nico was blinded by light, and he squinted through his eyelashes as Will seemed to glow along with it. Nico heard him screaming, and he yelled back to him. He
was about to summon his own power, but before he could do so the light dimmed.

Will stood, shaking, and then collapsed to the ground writhing in pain.

"Will!"

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil all ran forward, but Nico was the first to reach him. He dropped to his knees next to the son of Apollo. His whole body was illuminated with light, and his skin burned feverishly under his hand. Nico's heart was in his throat. He had no idea what was happening, how to help him... He looked desperately at Lou Ellen and Cecil, but they looked as scared as he felt.

Will continued to struggle in agony for a moment, and then everything changed.

His movements ceased. The glow left his skin and he grew deathly still. There was no sound from him, not even the gasp of breath. "Will?" Nico whispered. There was no answer.

With a shaking hand he reached out to touch his wrist. There was no pulse. Panic spiked through him and he clutched at Will's hand, desperately searching for his life force.

"Will!" He screamed. Lou Ellen and Cecil didn't move, completely overcome in shock.

Wild terror gripped him and reached out with his hand to touch Will's face, not caring that they were there. His skin was cold to touch and pale, far paler than it should have been. Nico raced to where his bag was in the grass, tearing nectar and ambrosia out of it. He trickled some into Will's mouth, more than was safe, praying to the Gods that it would revive him.

"Come on." He whispered.

Will didn't move.

The forest became silent, colder, darker than ever. The quiet was broken only by their ragged breathing, which steamed in the air like dry ice.

A single snowflake floated down in the darkness. Nico blinked in surprise as it landed on his wrist, and he looked up into the black sky to see a swirling vortex of frozen rain.

It had begun to snow.
If Will was sure of one thing, it was that he was on fire. There was absolutely no other explanation as to why he was in so much pain. Either that or his heart had decided to start pumping lava through his veins. He just hoped he wouldn't combust or explode... that could prove messy for his friends (not to mention the fact that it would really suck for him). Right now he thought he would do just about anything to make the pain end.

For the love of Aphrodite, why did he try to use that power? Oh wait...

We need light!

Ooh, I have an idea! I should try to harness the power of Apollo!

I suck at all his other gifts but I can control a Gods power. What could possibly go wrong?

A lot, apparently, since his limbs were now melted off. He was blind from pain and his innards felt like they'd been jellified. There was nothing left of him but agony...

Someone was screaming.

He could hear it, but couldn't look to see who it was. The passage of time was a twisting serpent that eluded his comprehension. He had no idea how much of it had passed, but eventually he thought the pain was ending. With vague surprise he realized the screaming was coming from his own mouth.

Numbness blossomed in his chest. It spread through him, deadening his limbs like wildfrost.

"Will!" A familiar voice called his name but it rang beyond a borderland he couldn't remember.

He faded.

He was curled up on a cold stone floor. He didn't need to see the stone walls or feel the celestial bronze chains biting into his wrists to know he was back in that same cell. He'd woken up many times in it over the past week. His hands were bound behind him, and he pushed himself up awkwardly, waiting for the pain that he knew would follow. It split through his back, following the scar tracks that decorated the fevered skin. Some were beginning to heal, scabbing over so they cracked and stretched as he moved, but most were fresh. One of his eyes was swollen shut. A disgusting metallic taste coated his mouth and he spat, only to see that it came out red-tinted.

The taste of blood, he realized. Mortal blood, not the gold he'd grown to expect over his lifetime.

What had awoken him? Something was wrong, something was stolen from him... Images of trees flashed through his mind, and a pale face, dark hair, emotional dark eyes looking down at him in fear... was that Uncle Hades' son? It made no sense. Why was he seeing such things at a time like
this?

That vile, reptilian excuse of monster could be back for him any second.

His blood boiled and he ripped savagely at his chains. He wouldn't be here if it weren't for that chirpy blonde lady selling him out. He proceeded to call her every name under the sun in his head. He was always in a foul mood these days.

Endless torture did that to you.

His vision flickered again. He was in a room, surrounded by people who meant more to him than he had ever let on. He regretted that. They stood together, strapping on leather armor, slinging bows over their shoulders, swords hanging at their hips. It was all wrong. They should have been in the infirmary, not preparing for battle.

"No," he whispered.

There was no possible way his children could hear him, but one of the girls stood up. She walked closer, blue eyes piercing as she looked straight into him.

"This is our fight too," Kayla said.

Something slammed into Will's chest, hard.

He was with Nico di Angelo again and they were sprinting towards a cliff. They skidded to a stop at the edge and gazed down at the ocean rocks. A soft hand slipped into his. When he turned his head, Nico was already looking at him. "Together," he whispered, "On three." They jumped, plummeting towards the waves a thousand feet below. A second before he hit the rocks his surroundings changed and he found himself standing in a burning field of wheat. Ashes rained down around him, nearly obliterating the view of the mountains in the distance.

"Will!" There was a heavy pressure on his chest. Then it ceased.

And then softness on his mouth.

He was on Half-Blood Hill and Nico was beside him, tears streaming down his face.

"Please, come on."

Something slammed into Will's chest again. How rude. Didn't they realize he was dying? What was wrong with his friends? It happened again, and he gasped reflexively. Cold air hit his lungs like an icepack, and he frantically sucked in more, welcoming the relief.

"Will!" A cool hand touched his face, soothing his hot skin. He grabbed it and held it to his cheek.

Will opened his eyes.

Nico's face came into focus, dark eyes large and scared. Will hated to see that look on his face and he opened his mouth to reassure him but his throat was parched and he choked. He broke into a violent coughing fit, struggling to breath against the dryness.

A second later a hand slipped under his neck, lifting his head, and water trickled down his throat. He spluttered slightly on it, but managed to swallow some. His shook, rocked by spasms.

"What happened?" he gasped. "Am I dead?"
"You're not dead Will," Nico murmured gently. Will was surprised by the softness in his voice. The son of Hades seemed to be reassuring himself of the fact, more so than Will.

"I am," he croaked. He tried to smile reassuringly at the dark-haired boy. "I'm looking at an angel." It was difficult to tell through the haze but he thought Nico might have blushed. He thought back to the pressure on his chest and mouth and frowned at the son of Hades. "Did you just kiss me?"

His words resurrected Nico's usual scowl. "It's called CPR dumbass. You work in the infirmary so surely you know what that is." He snorted softly and shook his head. "And you call yourself a doctor!"

"Calm down, there's no need to get snippy." Will tried to raise his head but a wave of nausea hit him and he let it fall back to the earth. He groaned and squeezed his eyes shut. "Why'd you give me CPR? You only do that when someone's not breathing or their heart stops."

Nico glowered at him. "Good, you qualified for both."

"What?" Will stared at him as shock crept in. "I died?"

Nico shrugged his shoulders. "You collapsed. The light was all around you and you were screaming... You had no pulse, and you weren't breathing. I- I thought you were-" Nico's voice sounded strained. Will looked up at him to see that tears were forming in his eyes, which he blinked away furiously. Nico took a deep breath. Will watched as his expression changed from upset to irate. "What were you thinking Solace?" he yelled suddenly. "For all your going on about me hurting myself with my powers, you nearly killed yourself just now! What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking we needed light," Will muttered. So much for the nice, caring Nico who wanted to make sure he was okay. "It was just an idea."

Nico scowled. "Your idea sucked and it almost cost you your life!" He glared sternly at Will, waiting for a response. Will said nothing. He supposed Nico's anger was justified, since he might have cost them their quest with his reckless act, but it did seem rather harsh since he had also saved their lives. The same thought seemed to pass through Nico's mind at the same time, because he sighed and lowered his voice. "Thank you for saving us though. Just don't pull something like that again, okay?"

Will nodded. "I saw- there was so much." Will winced, trying to remember the flashes. He looked at Nico. "I saw us. We jumped off a cliff... and my siblings were preparing to fight." He gasped. "My dad! He's hurt. Python has him imprisoned." Will looked at Nico in a blind panic. "Where is the vial?"

Nico's expression softened. "It's gone."

"Gone?"

Nico swallowed. "It shattered." He shifted aside and Will followed his gaze to see the broken shards laying in the grass. "I'm sorry Will."

"But where...? What about his powers?" Will shouted. "They can't just be gone! Where did they go? Where is the light?" He tried to push himself up, but collapsed with a huff of pain. This isn't happening, he thought, there's got to be some explanation. I couldn't have screwed up this badly... "Oh my gods." he moaned aloud. "I broke my dad."

"That's ridiculous Will," Nico said quietly. "You can't destroy a god's power, not that easily at least. We'll figure it out, but right now you need to worry about yourself."
Will said nothing. As he stared up at the black night sky, something cold landed on his cheek. He realized it was snowing. He was pleasantly surprised to realize that Nico's hand was still on his face. He felt it trembling ever so slightly as he brushed a strand of hair from his eyes.

"Your hand is cold," he murmured.

Nico's expression closed and he withdrew it. "No!" Will's breath hissed through his teeth as his skin burned hotly where it had been. "I liked it."

Nico looked doubtful but he hesitantly reached out to put it back.

"Thanks. That's better."

Nico's dark eyes were inscrutable, but a small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Whatever you say Blondie."

They were interrupted by Lou Ellen's loud voice. "Would you two like to be left alone?"

Yes, Will thought, while at the same time Nico exclaimed, "No!" He pulled his hand back quickly. Will painfully pushed himself up and looked over at the daughter of Hecate, who was standing further back with Cecil. "Oh hey." Will croaked, grinning painfully at her. "Sup' Lou-Lou?"

She scowled, but she was plainly relieved that her friend wasn't dead. "You look awful Will... but thanks for saving us."

"Yeah," said Cecil. "What were those things?"

Nico hesitated. "My guess is the Oread. Unfriendly spirits." He fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment, torn between his thoughts, "Did you guys see...?"

"That girl," Will guessed. Nico looked down. "That was your sister, wasn't it? That was Bianca."

Nico let out a slow breath and nodded. "Yeah. I'm just glad it wasn't... my mother. After everything Croony said, I don't think I could bear it." Nico looked behind him at the two demigods. "I know you guys heard what Croony said before... about me. I just want you guys to know that I don't- I mean, I never meant to hurt anyone. His brother was trying to kill us all, and I didn't know what else to do. I get it if you're freaked out, and... I'm sorry."

Lou Ellen smiled a little. "It's alright Nico. You don't have to explain yourself to us."

Cecil nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you've saved our lives plenty of times. We trust you. You don't have anything to apologize for."

Nico looked at the two of them for a second and nodded slowly. "Thanks. I- I trust you guys too."

Lou Ellen and Cecil looked pleased, and she smiled warmly at the son of Hades. There was a moment where no one spoke.

Will broke it. "Aww. That was so beautiful you guys."

"Oh shut up Blondie," Nico mumbled, embarrassed.

Lou Ellen looked at him curiously. "Why do you call Will 'Blondie? We're all kind of blonde."

"Yeah, but I'm the prettiest," said Will.

"Exactly," Nico agreed, before he had time to think. "Wait, what? No!"
Will smirked. "No take-backs!"

Lou Ellen stood up. "Come on, we should get out of here before we're attacked again."

Nico looked back at Will. "Can you stand?" Will nodded, but he still felt feverish and when he put weight on his legs they shook. He immediately swayed, nausea rising up again. Nico reached out to steady him and Will managed to swallow his bile. Somehow, he didn't think the dark-haired boy would be particularly smitten if he vomited all over him.

They headed back to camp. Nico and Croony refused to even acknowledge each other, and Will made sure to glare ferociously at him for hurting his friend's feelings. It snowed throughout the night, and at sunrise they packed up and continued onward up the mountain. The snow was thick and the horses trudged through it slowly. They only had to stop once when Pomegranate bucked Nico off and proceeded to frolic around in it whinnying happily.

After an hour, they reached a village.

Croony wasted no time in ditching them the first chance he got, claiming he was taking the weapons to the blacksmith's.

The Village of the Shamans was beautiful, situated on small plateau partway up the mountain. It was right at the edge of the tree line and when Will looked back he could see the entire expanse of Elysium, stretching out from the foot of the mountain as far as the eye could see. At the entrance, a massive waterfall showered down from the cliffs, shimmering with the muted colors of a rainbow. Snowflakes floated down around them like feathers.

The trail continued to their left, where log cabins and odd shops wound around the craggy mountainside. The inhabitants seemed much more welcoming as well. Most seemed to be inside, keeping warm from the oncoming blizzard. A group of small children danced around in the snow, making snow angels and giggling. When their eyes fell on the four demigods, however, they leaned close to each other, whispering and pointing, particularly at the son of Hades. Another girl, slightly older than the rest and apparently braver as well, ran forward.

Will blinked when he saw her. She look familiar, but he couldn't place where he might have seen her before. Her eyes were a piercing green, and she wore a colorful dress with a long fur coat over the top. Will frowned. She wasn't a camper and he couldn't place her as anyone else he had known. When she spoke, her voice was brighter and higher than he'd expected;

"You four are alive." She sounded almost relieved. The girl nodded politely to Nico, and then eyed Will. "We have been expecting you, son of Apollo, though your companions are not what I imagined." She glanced back to Lou Ellen and Cecil, and then at the son of Hades. "But it matters not. Come with me. It is not safe out here and Asbolus will want to speak with you." Right on cue, the ground shook again.

"Asbolus?" Lou Ellen frowned thoughtfully. "Asbolus like the augur of the centaurs?"

"Yes," the girl said brightly. "He knew your quest would bring you here sooner or later. He has information for you, and aid if you so desire."

"Aid?" Lou Ellen asked doubtfully. "Like the aid he tried to give his friends and failed and they all ended up getting slaughtered by Hercules over a misunderstanding? That sort of aid?"

"Yes," the girl cast an amused glance back at the daughter of Hecate, "although if I were you I wouldn't bring that up."
The girl led them inside a large cabin across from the waterfall. A roaring fire pit burned in the center of the floor, lighting the wooden interior in an orange glow. Ornate tapestries smothered every inch of the walls. There were hundreds of them, overlapping thickly, depicting images and symbols of the God's. The door shut behind them, muffling the howling wind.

A reddish centaur stood at a round oak table, inspecting a large green and gold tapestry that was strewn across it. Its corners trailed over the edge, golden tassels skimming the floorboards.

The girl cleared her throat. "Asbolus, it is as you predicted. The Son of Apollo has arrived."

The centaur looked up. "I'm pleased to hear it. I was beginning to worry something had happened. I knew your quest would bring you here eventually."

"So we've heard," Will said faintly. "Can you help us get to the Oneiroi's Labyrinth?"

The centaur came around the table. "There is a narrow pass leading up into the mountains, a stairway behind the falls. The Labyrinth is not far from here."

"What is this?" Lou Ellen interrupted sharply.

Everyone followed her pointed finger to the great tapestry draped across the table. Will hadn't given it much notice when they first walked in, but now he looked closer at the gold stitching. He understood why Lou Ellen was intrigued by it. The images reminded him of Egyptian hieroglyphics he'd seen in movies, series of them creating a chain of events. One of the images was of a sun setting in the sky. It was clearly meant to be Elysium, it was the same mountain range, but the fields were in flames. The image was dotted in deep orange specks of silk, like sparks falling from the sky.

It looked eerily like one of the visions he'd had the night before.

Asbolus didn't respond immediately. He seemed agitated by her question, and glowered darkly at the tapestry. At last he said, "It is one of our prophecies. These," he motioned toward the walls, all covered in the cloths, "are all prophecies. Most of us in this village are seers or healers. Often times both. Many of us are distant descendants of the god Apollo." He gave Will an appraising look and sighed. "This particular one, depicts Tartarus' rise to power in Elysium."

There was an uncomfortable pause in the conversation. Cecil cleared his throat. "When you say 'Rise to Power', I assume you mean a long time ago, before the Gods."

The centaur shook his head sadly. "Unfortunately, no. This particular prophecy has not yet to come to pass, but I fear the time is upon us."

"Upon us? What makes you think that?" asked Lou Ellen.

Asbolus pointed to the image of the sun. "Because the falling sun marks the beginning."

Will stepped forward hurriedly. "Okay, hang on, Apollo's not fallen. He's been kidnapped by Python. We need to find him and rescue him."

"The sun is fallen," the centaur said quietly. "It happened last night. I felt it."

Will froze at the words. "What... did you feel?" he asked, a little hoarsely.

He gulped as the centaur fixed him with a green-eyed stare. "I felt what everyone did. A chill in the air which was not present before. There is no warmth from the sun, it's power is lost. Apollo's
strength has been growing weaker with each passing day and finally, last night, it failed."

To say Will felt ashamed didn't cover it. So he'd been right, he'd actually had destroyed Apollo's powers the night before. He glanced over to see Nico's reaction, but the son of Hades was frowning dubiously at the images. Of course, Will thought, he didn't believe it was possible for a God's power to ever truly fade, after all, anything, monsters or gods, could eventually be reborn. Will could only hope he was right.

Asbolus continued, "Three wars in three consecutive years. It would seem Kronos' defeat has resulted in a cataclysm. When he was defeated, his mother was furious. When she too was defeated, her husband became furious." The centaur shook his head grimly. "Now he plans to seek vengeance for both of them... and is the prophecy is anything to go by, he'll start here. In Elysium."

"Why would Tartarus choose to take over Elysium of all places?" asked Lou Ellen. "Everyone here is already dead."

"I can only guess at that, but I do have an idea." Asbolus sighed. "Twice now, the mortal world was saved from destruction. It is too well guarded, protected by both the Olympians and their children. Elysium, however, is part of the Underworld. Sure, there are plenty of minor Gods and Goddesses down here, but Hades alone is the one who truly protects it. I believe Tartarus wishes to gain control of the Underworld before the mortal world, this time. That way, any demigod who is struck down in the war will be sure to end up in his grasp, their souls forced to do his bidding." The centaur fixed his gaze on Nico. "You of all people, son of Hades, know the devastation that would occur."

Nico looked pale. "There would be no rebirth or peace for anyone." Nico shook his head. "But that's not possible. Tartarus is imprisoned. There's no way he could organize the kind of force necessary to take the Underworld, from where he is. He can't get out."

"That may be true," Asbolus stated, "But he is not the only one upset by Gaea's defeat. Python was one of her most loyal supporters. She is the one who placed him in charge of Delphi originally, before Lord Apollo killed him. Now he is angry and vengeful. I would not be surprised if he was seeking a way to release her husband from his prison."

"And he thinks kidnapping Apollo will somehow help with that?" Will demanded, shaking his head. "Nico's right. Tartarus is imprisoned, one created by the God's themselves. There's no way he can get out. Zeus himself makes sure of that. He's the only one who knows how."

"Exactly," said Asbolus. "And now Python has sunk his fangs into Zeus' son. He got lucky when Zeus decided to remove Apollo's powers, a punishment which I'm sure Zeus is sincerely regretting. No doubt that snake has already gone to work on him, poisoning his mind."

"If this is true, then why is he having the Oneiroi host these Games for him?" Nico asked. "We thought he was somehow going to kill Apollo with them. Will had a vision of him fighting in a gladiator tournament. If he really wants information, why would he draw this kind of attention to himself?"

"Because he is seeking allies. Python is manipulative and spiteful. No doubt he does intend to kill Apollo eventually, but before that, he wants to learn what he can from him, humiliate him. He wants to show others, whether they be potential allies or enemies, what he is capable of."

Will shook his head. "Python must be mad if he thinks torturing Apollo would make Zeus want to give up the keys to Tartarus' prison," he whispered. "Zeus would never trade that sort of important
information for anything. Not even his son's life."

Asbolus raised an eyebrow. "And has Zeus done anything to save Apollo's life?"

Will stared at him, as understanding began to creep in. "No," he said dully. "He's done nothing."

The centaur nodded. "Now you know why. Zeus isn't foolish enough to think Apollo simply ran away. He can't risk going down there to save his son, not when so much is on the line. Who knows how many powerful allies Python has working for him. If it went wrong, if Zeus himself were somehow caught, it would be disastrous."

"Zeus doesn't care," Will whispered hollowly. "He's going to let Apollo die." He was feeling hot and feverish again, and he stepped back from the fire.

Asbolus' expression softened. "I am sure he cares very much Will. It is the hardest thing any parent could go through, being forced to watch as their child is destroyed, unable to act or help them. Even for immortals. Zeus is not a fool. He probably knew exactly what Python had in mind the instant Apollo was taken. Now he is merely distancing himself to make the inevitable less painful."

"We can't just let him die!" Will shouted.

Was no one willing to help Apollo? Part of him wanted to run outside and scream up at the sky, to Zeus, demanding that he save Will's dad. Another part wanted to curl up and cry, wishing he'd never gone on a quest.

The largest part of him was furious. How dare some snake guy think he could take Apollo like that? How dare he try to start another war, one that could kill hundreds more demigods at least. Will remembered the kids who had died only weeks ago, the one's he had tried in vain to heal. Some had been his friends. His anger lit like a spark on gasoline, engulfing him in a rage he didn't know he had. He opened his mouth, to demand that Nico shadow travel them straight to Python so Will could tie his serpentine body into a knot and kick him over the cliff he'd seen in his vision, when searing hot pain surged through him. It happened as it had the previous night, leaving his skin tingling and hot.

It was gone just as fast, but Will yelped, more out of shock than actual pain.

Nico was beside him in an instant. "Will, what's wrong?" Nico's voice was tight and carefully controlled.

Will shook his head. "I don't know, I just-" His breath hissed through his teeth as another flash of pain struck him. The room was sweltering. Why was he so hot? He jumped when a cool hand touched his forehead.

"You're burning up," Nico exclaimed. He hesitated for a moment and then grabbed Will's arm. "I'm taking him outside," he announced firmly, glowering at everyone as if daring them to argue. No one did.

The door slammed shut behind them and Nico helped Will sit down on the porch steps. He was still shaking. "What was that?" Nico asked sharply. Will looked at him, startled, and Nico seemed to realize he was being unduly harsh. He softened his voice. "Are you still in pain from last night?"

Will mumbled something under his breath that was lost in the wind.

"What?"
Will rolled his eyes. "I said, That's what she said."

Nico narrowed his eyes. "Who said what to you?" he demanded.

"Nevermind," Will grumbled. "I don't know what happened. I was just upset and it flashed through me all of a sudden." He looked down and saw that his hands were shaking in his lap. He clasped them together and took a deep breath. "It's just... We came here thinking that we were going to rescue Apollo from Python, and then go home. I guess it's never that simple, is it?"

"It might still be," Nico offered. "We'll just have to rescue Apollo before Python gets anything important from him." He paused, thinking. "We know Python is at Delphi at Mount Parnassus," he said slowly, "maybe we should just go straight there? It would save us time-" He faltered when he saw Will was already shaking his head at the idea. "Why not?" Nico demanded.

"You heard Rachel's prophecy. "The answer you seek, it's in the games you must play.' It's clear that the Pythian games are what it's referencing, and Oneiroi are the one's running them. We have an invitation, remember?" He motioned toward his backpack, where the red poppy was stored. "This is what we have to do. We can't change a prophecy."

"But we can fight it!" Nico said fiercely, kicking at the snow on the ground.

"Yes," Will said, "but not like this. Not when it's so specific. Believe me, I'm a son of Apollo, and I know how prophecies work."

For a moment it looked like the son of Hades was going to keep arguing, but then he just sighed. "Fine." Nico glared out at the snow falling from the sky. "We'll just have to hope Apollo can hold out for another week."

A soft, girlish voice interrupted their conversation.

"He is wrong."

Will looked up to see the same green-eyed girl from before. She stood ten feet away, out in the snow, watching the two boys.

"I'm sorry?" Will asked.

"Asbolus is wrong. He thought the power of Apollo faded last night. Even you fear that it is destroyed." Her electric green eyes seemed to glow in the stark landscape. "But I spent much of my lifetime alongside Lord Apollo's powers. I know when they are close."

"Close?" Will blinked at her, startled. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Where is it?"

"You are his son. It is right here."

Will stared at her, shocked. In that instant he realized why she looked familiar and yet he hadn't recognized her at first. The last time he'd seen her she'd been nothing but a corpse, cursed by the God of the Underworld to recite prophecies until she crumbled to dust...

"You- you're-" Will stared at her in a mixture of shock and awe. The girl didn't say anything else but smiled at him. Will watched her colorful dress blow in the winds as she ran back to her friends.

She was the old Oracle of Delphi.

It took Will a moment to tear his gaze away from her. "I know that the Labyrinth isn't going to be
easy, but I'll be glad to get back to the mortal world. As beautiful as Elysium is, I think I'll save it for when I'm actually dead."

Nico nodded, but something else seemed to be on his mind as they sat there together. "What were you trying to tell me yesterday?" he asked abruptly. "Before we were interrupted."

Will looked at him taken aback. "Oh, uh, it's nothing. The moment's kind of lost anyways." He mumbled awkwardly. The dark-haired boy always seemed to choose the most inopportune time to bring things up.

"I don't care, I want to know," Nico insisted. "Is it something to do with the quest?"

"Well, no," Will muttered, remembering his failed attempt at coming out to the him and professing his undying love and devotion... okay, maybe not the last part. Yet.

Will looked back at Nico, who was now pouting at him. Whether it was intentional or unintentional, he looked adorable. Will gulped. "Um..." He cast his mind around, wondering how to proceed. His eyes fell on the rainbow and he smirked. "Do you see that rainbow over there?"

Nico gave him a startled look. "Yeah...?"

"Yes, well. That's me."

Nico looked back and forth between Will and the rainbow a few times. "Yeahhhh... no. Sorry Blondie, I'm just not seeing it."

"Not literally!" Will sighed. "I mean that I am, uh..." Where was he going with this again? He looked back at Nico who was staring at him looking utterly baffled. Will sighed. "Nico, I'm gay."

To his astonishment, Nico snorted loudly. "No shit, Sherlock."

Will gaped at the son of Hades as he continued to snigger.

"I'm sorry?" Will asked. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but this wasn't it. He wasn't that flamboyant! Am I? He wondered. Sure, he liked to wear pink shoes and, occasionally, pink sunglasses, and Kayla had told him he had a high, girly scream. And yeah, he doubted most guys jumped up and down screaming gleefully when Hermione and Ron got together, but still.

Nico shrugged. "You're the most cheerful person I know, Will. Personally I prefer the dark, but I suppose rainbows could be considered happy too."

Will's mouth fell open.

"Cheerful? Happy? What are you talking about?" Will wanted to face-palm. "Death Boy, don't you know what 'gay' means?"

"Clearly better than you," Nico exclaimed. "What do you think it means?"

"No it- it means..." Will stuttered haltingly, wondering if Nico was messing with him. He wouldn't put it past the son of Hades, but then again, Nico was from the forties so it was very possible that he wasn't entirely caught up with modern-day vocabulary. Will sighed in resignation. The poor kid needed help, and he was the only one who could give it to him. "Once, in a time long ago, 'gay' did indeed mean 'happy'..." Will said solemnly. He paused for a moment and then hurried on, "...but now it just means you're homosexual."
Nico stared at him. "Oh." He muttered, turning pink.

Will continued helpfully. "And 'homosexual' means that-," ("I know what it means," Nico squeaked.) "-you're sexually attracted," ("Stop talking!" Nico groaned.) "-to your own sex."

Nico glared at him. "Thank you for that."

"You're welcome," Will said graciously. "Now let me finish-"

"Are you kidding me?" Nico demanded furiously. "You're not done?"

"I never kid about health, safety, sexual health, or sexual safety. Or Harry Potter. Now, they don't often teach about homosexuality in Sex-Ed, so-"

"Stop saying that word!"

"What word? Homosexual? Come on Nico, it's not embarrassing! Say it with me. Homo-"

"Solace, I'm going to kick you again!"

That shut him up. Will whimpered and crossed his legs at the memory.

Nico rolled his eyes. "Thank you," he grumbled. "So you're…?"


The dark-haired boy was thoughtful for a moment and then frowned again. "Why were you talking about a rainbow before?"

Will shrugged. "Rainbows are used to symbolize that." He almost laughed at the look of astonished horror on the son of Hades' face.

"What?" Nico gasped, looking offended. "You can't be serious." He hesitated, and then added quietly, "I don't know how I feel about being represented by a rainbow."

A slow grin stretched across Will's face as he stared at the son of Hades, who was now bright red. Will had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. "Oh my Gods." He groaned. "Nico, I can't believe you didn't know what 'gay' means, but you did know what 'come' means. Where exactly are you getting your education?"

Nico shrugged. "Just videos I find on the internet. I have great wifi connection." He added, like it would help.

Will gaped at him. "Nico, exactly what kind of videos are you watching?."

"I dunno." Nico muttered. "Just whatever Jules-Albert downloads. Although I do feel unusually ashamed of myself after watching them."

Will was still spluttering at him when the door opened and Cecil and Lou Ellen stepped out.

"Are you feeling better Will?" She asked.

It took him a moment to collect himself, but he nodded. "Did Asbolus say anything else?" Will asked them.

"Not really," said Cecil. "He just gave us more details on finding the Labyrinth."
"We should get in touch with camp before we leave," said Lou Ellen. "I'm sure they're worried."

"Good idea," Will said gratefully. He was surprised by how good the thought of seeing their friends sounded.

The four of them sent an Iris Message back to camp at the afore mentioned rainbow. They interrupted Percy, Annabeth, Jason, and Piper, who were standing together on the edge of the lake, arguing. They all wore thick jackets and Will was stunned to see that they were standing in what appeared to be at least a foot of snow. Annabeth was holding what appeared to be a set of blueprints and Jason was gesturing towards an open space.

They caught the end of Percy's sentence, "-and it needs to be really big."

"Not to mention nonexistent," Jason muttered, squinting thoughtfully at the blueprints.

"It had better exist Grace, or else I'll challenge you to another match of water polo."

Annabeth rolled her eyes as she came to Jason's rescue. "We're not building you your own shrine Seaweed Brain. You're not a god. And," she added, "you already have your own cabin. That's more than most of us get."

"I could have been," Percy countered, crossing his arms. "I'm like an honorary god." Everyone stared at him doubtfully. "It's true! I-" Percy's eyes suddenly traveled past Annabeth, Jason, and Piper and landed on the Iris Message. "NEEKS!" He screamed, making his friends jump. They all looked around.

"Oh my Gods!" Jason shouted, smacking Piper's arm in apparent excitement. In a matter of seconds he and Percy had shoved past their respective girlfriends and were hissing at the son of Hades like a pair of concerned dodo birds.

"How dare you run away like that Neeks?" Jason shouted. "We were worried sick!"

"We were beginning to think you were dead!" Percy yelled.

"Where are you?" Jason demanded. "Did Will kidnap you? Is he keeping you locked away? Tell me, and I'll come rescue you-!"

"Calm down," Nico interrupted. "And no, Will isn't holding me captive... although frankly I'm surprised he hasn't tried that yet. We're in Elysium."

Percy blinked. "Wait... you are dead?"

Nico rolled his eyes. "No, our quest led us here." His scowl deepened as he finally realize who 'Neeks' was. "I'm sorry, I must have misheard you... what did you just call me?!"

Percy grinned mischievously. "Neeks! Jason came up with it!"

Jason glared at the son of Poseidon. "Oh sure, just throw me under the bus."

"Thank, I will." Percy looked back to meet the son of Hades' glower. "Relax Nico. We've been calling you that behind your back for weeks now."

"What?" Nico looked outraged by their betrayal.

Annabeth stepped forward. "I'm losing brain cells listening to this." She eyed the snow and shaking ground in the Iris message. "How's the quest going?"
"It was fine until a few minutes ago..." Nico did his best to fill them in on the details, which Will appreciated. He found it painful to think about what his dad must be going through. Everyone else looked unsettled as well, and Annabeth said, "I'm so sorry Will." When Nico described their conversation with Asbolus however, everyone looked stricken, especially Percy and Annabeth.

"Tartarus? Are you sure?" she gasped.

Nico lifted his shoulders. "That's what he said."

Jason frowned. "Let me get this straight. Python intends to make a display of killing Apollo at the end of the games in a week. He also thinks that Apollo may know something about unlocking Tartarus' prison, because Zeus is his dad, so he's trying to get that from him first." Will nodded confirmation. "So you guys are trying to rescue Apollo before any of that happens, and to do so, you have to find the Oneiroi, who are three sons of Hypnos, because they can get you into Delphi and, by extension, the games."

"Yes."

Percy blew out a slow breath. "You guys had better get a move-on. What all do you know about the Labyrinth of... Sleep, or whatever?"

"Dreams," Lou Ellen corrected. "And not much. We were actually hoping Annabeth might know about it."

The daughter of Athena frowned. "I've read a little bit about it in some of the scrolls from New Rome. Their library is huge." She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear and bit her lip. "I don't think anyone really knows that much. Just make sure you keep an eye on the gates. They're are known for leading people astray."

"Gates?" asked Nico.

"The Gates of Horn and Ivory." Annabeth said smartly. "Ivory represents illusion and trickery, and horn is the truth. Make sure you go through the right one. No doubt the Labyrinth is meant to trick you. Stuff that seems real, may actually be your imagination."

"Right," said Cecil. "And I assume the gate we want is... horn?"

Annabeth raised an eyebrow. "Obviously."

Percy ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, you guys just worry about surviving this Labyrinth and finding Apollo. We," he motioned to himself, Annabeth, Jason, and Piper, "will try to get in touch with the Gods, see what's going on."

"Yeah." Jason nodded. "I'll talk to my dad."

"We know there are other Gods who want to help Apollo," said Piper. "Hermes, for one, and Artemis is probably missing her brother. We can contact Thalia and the rest of the Hunt."

"Thanks guys," said Will. "Wait, one last thing. Are... are my brothers and sisters okay? Marisol was upset before I left..." His voice trailed off anxiously.

Annabeth nodded immediately. "They're all fine. Worried about you, of course, and Apollo, but otherwise fine."

Will breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I thought that maybe..."
Percy stepped forward. "Don't worry Will. We won't let anything happen to your family."

An hour later, they were climbing up a steep, frozen path behind the waterfall. They left the horses behind, knowing it wouldn't be fair to drag them into the Labyrinth. Will slipped suddenly, and his stomach lurched as he thought he would fall down the steep path. He didn't and he looked up to see Nico gripping his wrist. He pulled the son of Apollo back up, and Will understood why he had slipped. They had reached stone steps. They wound steeply up the mountainside, icy and slick with frost.

Will wasn't sure how long they climbed; soon his legs burned and he was gasping for air. The altitude wasn't helping, and he still felt shaky from his earlier episode.

At long last the path evened out and they found themselves at the entrance to a cave. An old, crumbling archway stood over it, the stone was etched with Greek writing:

Ο Λαβύρινθος των Ονείρων:
Πού τα ονείρα σας στη ζωή και στη συνέχεια να σας σκοτώσει.

"Labyrinth of Dreams," Nico read. "Where your dreams come to life and then kill you." He turned to his friends with a smirk on his face. "Gee, I wonder if we're in the right place. What's the plan guys?"

"Let's send someone in as a sacrifice," Cecil suggested. "I nominate Lou! We'll send her in... and listen for screaming." He grinned at the daughter of Hecate.

"I hate you," she muttered, fingering the golden mirror at her side.

"Or," said Nico, "we can just walk in."

It was a sound plan, and that's what they did. Will wasn't sure what to expect; perhaps he'd find himself naked in front of a crowd of people, or maybe his teeth would start falling out, or maybe Cecil was right and he'd find himself in a Freudian situation... that could get awkward with Nico around. Will winced at the humiliating possibilities.

The darkness seemed to grow with every step, the cave walls closing in. It was cold inside but seemed to grow warmer the farther they walked. Their footsteps echoed ominously. Will found himself jumping at every noise he heard, such as when he kicked a rock and sent it skittering away, until at last the exit was in sight.

"I don't get it," said Lou Ellen. "That was it?"

Nico blew out a breath. "I don't know."

They exited the cave and found themselves on a long dirt road.

Will and Nico exchanged looks of confusion and turned around, but the cave they had exited was nowhere to be seen.

"That's weird," said Cecil. "Should we follow the path?"

It seemed like the only option. To either side of the dirt road, rolling green hills extended. Will felt strangely lonely despite being surrounded by his friends.

Eventually the road ended and they came upon a manor.
It was a small mansion, made of thick stones and large bay windows. Jasmine climbed up the walls and draped over a giant, elegantly carved wooden front door. The path led into the courtyard, where a round fountain stood. Gargoyles and sculptures were carved into the stone. It was dry of water, but Will thought it would be quite an impressive sight if it had been working. An iron gate surrounded the square, red and white climbing roses blooming over the pickets. There were several large trees, one of which had a dilapidated tire-swing dangling from the branches.

Will stared around at their surroundings, until Lou Ellen asked the question on all of their minds. "Where are we?"

No one had an answer.

There was no one else in sight, but something felt different. The delicate scent of jasmine filled the air, and trees rustled softly in the breeze. It was indubitably warmer than where they had come from, but something was still off. If Will wasn't mistaken, he'd think they were back in the mortal world.

"I don't understand," he said, peering curiously towards the mansion. "Are we out?"

Cecil had been grasping the hilt of his sword since they'd entered the cave, but he finally released it. "That was a little underwhelming," he muttered. "I was expecting something more..."

"Terrifying?" Lou Ellen offered. Cecil nodded.

The only one who hadn't said anything was Nico. With a lurch, Will wondered where he was. He turned and, to his relief, saw that he was standing behind them, still staring at the house with a strange look on his face. He looked shocked, spooked even. Will saw his dark eyes skim over the fountain and the tire swing, before coming to a rest on the great front door.

"Nico?" Will took a half-step towards him. "What is it? Do you know where we are?"

"We're not out," Nico said slowly.

"How do you know? Everything looks normal." Will didn't understand why the son of Hades looked so frightened, or why he was eyeing the house like it held all of his worst memories... a horrible thought struck the son of Apollo.

"We're in Italy," Nico said. "That's my old house."

Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

I feel kind of bad torturing Apollo and Will, since they're so sunny and cheerful... okay, not really, I'm just getting started... :D Obviously in the next chapter I will have to take some liberties with Nico's life in the past. I figure it's about time to look into Will, Cecil, and Lou Ellen's history as well. If anyone has any requests I'd love to hear them!

Thanks for Reading! Please review!
Hello again! Long time no see. Since I last posted I have started college, a job, and began writing an actual novel... anyways, I am back now, and I am sincerely sorry for the delay.

*I do not own anything Percy Jackson and the Olympians or Heroes of Olympus! That all belongs to Rick Riordan!*

Chapter 10

"So this is where you lived in the forties?" Will asked for what must have been the fifth time in a row. The four of them stood just inside the iron front-gate, peering around at the decaying garden and darkened windows of the mansion.

Nico nodded confirmation to Will's question, his thoughts racing.

He knew the Labyrinth was controlled by the three brothers of dreams, Morpheus, Phobetor, and Phantasos, who, as far as Nico figured, could manipulate it to appear however they wished. There were many things, horrible things from his past, that Nico wouldn't have been very surprised to see, Tartarus, giants, that sort of thing. But not... this.

Not his childhood home, a place where he'd actually been happy. This was a place where he'd had a family and fit in. Where he was surrounded by people who cared for him. It was the only place he'd ever truly felt loved and accepted.

The Lethe had erased all of his memories nearly eighty years ago and since then a precious few of his new ones had been what he might call pleasant. The majority of his old memories had remained a mystery to him over the years, but a few had trickled through with time.

Nico couldn't recall much of the details from his time spent at this house, in fact he was surprised that he had been able to recognize it at all. It all looked vaguely familiar and yet unrecognizable, like it was something only his subconscious could still remember. An old ghost from his past.

Despite being unable to remember much about his old life, he couldn't understand the apprehension he felt upon seeing the house. Surely, he thought, it contained good memories, ones of Bianca and his mother, even his grandparents. There was no reason to be scared, no reason at all.

He was fairly certain nothing bad had ever happened here.

Keeping his hand on the hilt of his sword, Nico cautiously eyed the surrounding yard. "It's all the same as I remember," he whispered. "At least, I think it is."

Beneath a great tree an old tire swing swung lazily in the breeze. In the center of the courtyard a
grey-stone fountain gurgled softly. Nico couldn't count the number of times he and Bianca had played under those trees, running over the grass and weaving leaf crowns from the soft blades… Out back there was an orchard, he knew instinctively, filled with lemon trees. Inhaling deeply through his nose, he knew he was correct; the faint tangy scent hung over the air, making his mouth water.

Nico took a shaky breath. "How are we here?"

"Maybe we traveled through the space-time continuum and we're now stranded in the 1940's until we change the future," Will suggested.

"This is the Labyrinth of Dreams, Will, not Doctor Who," said Lou Ellen. The daughter of Hecate grinned at Nico suddenly, giving his all-black attire a once-over. "You know, I never would have thought you lived in the country Nico. I always pegged you as more of the city-type."

"I was born in the city," said Nico hesitantly. "I spent a few years there, and started going to school. My mother brought us to the countryside the summer before my eighth birthday at my father's request. He thought it would be easier for him to keep an eye on us out here, away from all the craziness of the city." Nico fell silent when he realized everyone was watching him. He flushed, dearly wishing he had kept his mouth shut. He neither wanted nor needed their pity over his mangled and messed up past. "This is my grandparent's house," he concluded shortly.

Cecil frowned. "You lived with your grandparents?"

Nico looked at him in some surprise. The son of Hermes had an uncharacteristically dark look on his face. Nico wondered if he had somehow struck a nerve.

"Uh yeah. But it wasn't exactly unheard of back then, and we only stayed here for a year. I never got to know them that well and then this place was destroyed and it was… well, it was too late. Times were dangerous even for mortals, especially if you were a child of… the Big Three" Nico stopped abruptly and looked down at his ring before continuing. "The point is, my dad thought he could protect us better out here than in the city."

And look how wrong he was, Nico thought, but he kept the thought to himself.

Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil were all looking at him sympathetically and Nico hurried on;

"But none of that matters now. This is just some sort of illusion conjured up by Morpheus and his brothers. We need to get moving and find a way out of this place."

"Annabeth mentioned something about gates," said Lou Ellen. "How do you think we can find them?"

"Maybe we should go inside," suggested Will.

Nico's eyes widened. "No way. We can't go in there."

Everyone stared at him.

"Why not?" Will asked when Nico didn't elaborate.

"Because..." Nico struggled to find the words.

For the first couple of years since he'd realized the truth about his past, he'd been bitter, feeling like his entire life had been stolen from him, which he supposed it sort of had. He had spent years
trying to forget about it, trying to distance himself from anything to do with his past. He didn't want all of that running and avoidance to have been for nothing. "...I just... can't. I don't want to see it. There's got to be some other way..." he finished desperately.

Lou Ellen looked sad. "I know it's not easy Nico, but we don't really have much choice. We can't go back, the entrance is gone and there's nothing else in sight. There's nowhere else to go.ˮ Lou Ellen glanced up at the sky, her braids cascading down her back. "And besides, it looks like there's going to be a storm."

They followed her gaze and Nico saw she was right. The sky flickered dimly above them. Even the wind had begun to pick up, carrying the unmistakable scent of ozone.

Nico shuddered.

Perfect, Nico thought miserably, that's just what I need.

He looked back at his friends, all of whom were staring at him, waiting for his answer.

Will stepped towards him, reaching out a hand to touch Nico's arm. He opened his mouth to say something, probably something encouraging, but Nico interrupted him.

"Forget it. It's fine," he murmured, shrugging away from Will's touch. "Let's get this over with."

Nico knew Will would have supported whatever Nico decided. Nico appreciated that about the son of Apollo, but this time he couldn't let him. He had no idea how Will was still so optimistic, despite being lost who-knows-where with his, his father's, and his sibling's lives at stake, but Nico didn't need to add another burden on top of that. If Will could handle all of that, he could handle going inside his old house.

Nico brushed past his three friends and led the way to the gate, Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil trailing after him. If this was the way it had to be, he wanted to get it over with. Beads of cold rain were beginning to land on his arms, which he brushed off with a quick swipe of his hand as he opened the gate.

They trailed into the courtyard, letting the gate swing shut behind them.

"You know I've always imagined your life as a young Italian lad in the forties," Will said in an obvious attempt to cheer Nico up.

Nico refused to take the bait and glared at him instead.

Undeterred, Will nudged him playfully. "I bet you were the cutest little kid ever."

"If you think ghosts and zombies are cute," Nico muttered grumpily. "And waking up to them in your bedroom in the middle of the night because they got lost on their way to the Underworld."

"Well... I bet you were a wonderful little helper for your dad. I'm sure he appreciated it."

Nico snorted. "Helper? I was eight, I had no clue. I ran away screaming and he made fun of me for it. I don't remember his exact words but he basically called me a wimp."

Will looked crestfallen. "Oh. So... you were more like the kid from the Sixth Sense?"

"What's that?"

"It's a movie about a kid who can-"
"It already sounds stupid," Nico muttered, interrupting Will.

Will sighed, moving away from him, and suddenly Nico was feeling guilty again. It was hardly Will's fault that they ended up here, and yet Nico was taking his anger out on him.

"But it wasn't always so bad," Nico forced out. "I suppose it could be sort of interesting, seeing it all again." Interesting would be putting it lightly. He looked sideways to see Will still looking glum. He tried again. "And I'll watch your dopey ghost movie when we get back. Maybe. If I suffer a stroke somewhere along the way."

"Gee, I can't wait," Will said, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah well, contain it Solace- I said maybe."

The corner of Will's mouth twitched up and he looked away.

Rain was beginning to fall more rapidly as they walked. Nico had stopped once again inside the gate, still delaying the inevitable.

"So what were your grandparents like?" Cecil asked Nico, taking him by surprise.

Nico frowned thoughtfully. "I don't really remember," he said. "I think they were kind to Bianca and me, but I remember them arguing a lot with my mother. I used to get the feeling that they were... disappointed with her."

"How come?" asked Lou Ellen.

Nico had to think about an answer to that. "I'm not sure. I was so young I didn't really know what was going on. I think they didn't really appreciate her lifestyle."

CAW!

The four of them jumped and spun around, reaching for their weapons. Nico was the fastest, already grasping the hilt of his sword ready to face... whatever the hell was in a labyrinth of Dreams. A unicorn shooting a rainbow out of its ass? Will's evil twin ready to do his worst with a hypodermic needle? Nico didn't think anything would surprise him.

Instead a huge white and gold bird perched atop the railing of the gate, its eyes dark and calculating. It cocked its head to the side, a jerky movement, and watched the four demigods.

"That's an eagle," Lou Ellen murmured. She let the little ball of magic she had summoned, flicker away in her palm.

Nico felt a chill go through him at her words.

Cecil made a face. "First dodos, now this. What are you, a bird whisperer?"

"Everyone knows what an eagle looks like," Lou Ellen insisted. "They're the symbol of Zeus."

The statement made Nico go cold, but before he could say anything he heard someone calling his name.

"Nico! Get away from that! Nico-!"

Nico froze, shock ripping through him like a bullet. He recognized that voice like he had heard it only yesterday...
He turned away from the bird and looked toward the house.

On the front porch stood a young woman. The dress she wore was a solemn plum color, a string of pearls gleaming around her neck. But what stood out about her most of all was the way her brown eyes blazed with fear. Standing there with her raven hair swirling in the wind, she looked younger than Nico had ever seen her.

He found him wanting to run to her and throw his arms around her, as if he had done it a thousand times before. He even took a half-step forward. Then his reasoning caught up with him and he felt horrified with himself. Was he really so naïve to fall for what could only be a trick?

Beside him Will shifted. "Nico, who is that?"

Nico didn't want to tell him.

Denial caught up with him and he wondered dreamily if he could lie. Would it be too much to hope that she would simply evaporate along with this house and any other long-faded memories that might come rearing their heads?

Will stared at her a second longer before understanding dawned on his face.

Nico may not have looked much like his mother, but Maria was the spitting-image of Bianca, someone Will had seen before.

It was undoubtedly only too easy for him and the others to make the connection. Sure enough, Will's eyes widened. "Nico, is that… your mom?"

"Nico, quickly!" At this point Maria stopped waiting for them to react and instead ran forward herself.

The shock of it made Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil spring into action and start towards the house. Nico was still too stunned to respond, sure this was some kind of trap. It wouldn't be the first time. He was about to say so when lightning flashed across the sky, a hideous crack following suit.

Nico gasped and flinched.

A warm hand close around his, and Will dragged him along.

They stumbled in through the old oak door and into the dimly lit entryway. Nico was careful not to look at his mother as he passed her in the doorway.

He just had time to take in his surroundings before he turned around again; registering a grand staircase which ran up the center of the hallway, crafted of dark oak. An adjoining hallway split off to the right.

After slamming the door Maria immediately whirled around. Nico wrenched his hand away from Will's quickly. Before Nico could do little more than register a dark and fearful anger in Maria's eyes, she was off, flying into a full tirade in heated Italian.

"Are you crazy Nicolas? What have I told you about going outside alone? Stay away from the gate! My heart nearly stopped. I just spent the last twenty minutes searching everywhere for you. If your father knew, he would be horrified! What if you had been struck by lightning? Or attacked by that eagle? You didn't try to leave the property, did you? Don't just stand there, say something! You had better have a good explanation for putting yourself at risk."
Nico flinched, mouth flopping open like a fish. "I- I'm not going to get struck by lightning," is all he managed to stammer out. "That's ridiculous."

"Don't you take that tone with me young man. And it is not ridiculous." Maria breathed deeply then and appeared to force herself back to some semblance of calm. "I don't feel like arguing with you right now. All that matters is that you are alright." She appraised him deep brown eyes, as if daring her son to disagree. "You are alright aren't you sweetie?"

"Um…" Define alright, Nico thought weakly. "Yes…?"

"Good. You just need to understand how important it is that you don't leave the prop-"

"The property, okay I get it. I understand," Nico grumbled, glaring at the ground.

"Are you sure? Because it doesn't seem like it since you insist on continually going out there even after I specifically told you not to-"

"Okay, whatever," Nico snapped. How lovely, he thought. Apparently it took less than a minute for them to be upset with each other, even if it was all fake. The thought made him feel ashamed. It didn't last long however;

"Don't you get all high and mighty with me, young man. Remember that I used to wipe your bottom," Maria said smartly. "Now you and your friends had better go get washed up before supper. I'm making your favorite, too. Or is spaghetti no longer good enough for your royal highness?"

Maria marched away without waiting for an answer, still muttering under her breath. Nico stared after her in shock.

He had almost forgotten about Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil. They all looked stunned. Nico realized they had not understood any of the conversation that had just transpired.

"What the Hades is happening?" Will whispered loudly, confirming Nico's belief. "What did she say? And did she call you Nicolas?"

"I- um- uhhh-," Nico gulped. "Apparently were having dinner. And yes, my name is Nicolas."

Will looked like Christmas had come early. Nico wanted to smack the look off his face.

Lou Ellen's eyes widened. "Dinner? What's on the menu? I just mean, she's not a monster, right? We're not on the menu, are we?"

"Guess we'll find out," said Cecil.

"Well," Will muttered heavily. "If it's any consolation, I bet you'd taste great… Nicolas."

Cecil began sniggering about something then, while Nico stared at Will in genuine concern. "First of all, don't call me that. Second, no one's eating anyone."

Nico rolled his eyes and led them down the hall, making his way to where he felt the kitchen should be.

Sure enough he found it behind a doorway with notches at various heights cut into the doorframe and ages written next to them. The wood floors were whitewashed in what looked like a sloppy attempt at brightening up the room. Outside the far window, the night had stained the sky a dark indigo. Rain splattered against the glass and thunder rumbled.
"This place is cool," Cecil commented. He pointed to a door near the one they had just come from. "What's that?"


"And that?"

"A washroom."

"Like a bathroom you mean? And what about that?" He pointed at a door along the farthest wall.

"That's…" Nico stopped and stared blankly at the door.

It looked completely unfamiliar. It did not stir any memories, nor did he remember any other room leaving from the kitchen. Furthermore, the second he thought about opening it a feeling of dread washed over him. He wanted to stay as far away from it as possible.

Cecil reached forward to grasp the handle.

"Don't!" Nico shouted, but it was too late.

The door swung open to reveal stairs descending into the dark. They all peered down curiously.

"What is it?" Cecil asked.

"I- I'm not sure. I can't remember," Nico said, feeling at a loss.

"A cellar?" suggested Lou Ellen.

"Come on guys," Will said, noticing Nico's discomfort. "Let's not open closed doors."

Lou Ellen grinned as Cecil closed the door again. "The poet in you refuses to go unheard, huh Will?"

Dinner was awkward to say the least.

You would think sitting in a dreamland with your long dead relatives who were all murdered, with authentic Italian spaghetti cooked seventy-one years ago would be a good conversation starter but Nico couldn't do much more than glare at his mother and his spaghetti.

At either end of the table sat Nico's grandparents, two people whom Maria showed startling resemblance, while Nico, Will, and Cecil sat along one of the long sides. Somehow Lou Ellen had ended up sitting next to Maria, because Nico had adamantly refused to do. Maria noticed and smiled warmly across at her son, as if to show that she wasn't affected by his rudeness. Nico stared back nervously.

He wanted to ask where Bianca was, but did not. Seeing her again would only be more painful in the long run and would only do more harm than good, he decided. He didn't particularly want to see anyone else from his past. He just wanted to leave.

"This pasta is wonderful, Ms. di Angelo," said Lou Ellen, her voice like a megaphone in the silence.

Maria smiled gratefully at her and nodded amiably before turning to her son. "Nico dear, where do you find these odd friends of yours? Do they not know Italian?"
Nico deadpanned back at his fake-mother. If that was the only problem she saw with this whole situation he decided she was quite lucky. Beside him he could feel Will and Cecil shift, clearly ill at ease under the watchful gaze of his grandparents. Nico doubted they felt more uncomfortable than he did.

At the end of the table his grandmother spoke, "There he goes again. That's disrespectful to your mother dear. Speak up when you're spoken to." She turned to her daughter. "Honestly Maria, have you taught him any manners at all? I get the impression you have just let him run amok by himself all his life, doing whatever he pleases."

"I have taught him manners, and of course he doesn't run amok by himself," Maria told her, expression darkening.

"I've noticed," said Nico's grandmother. "You never even let the boy leave the property. I've said it before and I'll say it again; he needs friends, Maria. And I don't mean these ones; he needs ones he can see daily. You can't just keep him locked inside this house; he should be outside, playing with the other children. There are some very nice children down by the marketplace. I could take him to school if you like, let him play some sports."

"It's too dangerous."

Nico's grandmother chuckled, eyeing Maria. "I know you feel that way dear, but that's how every mother feels about her children. I felt the same way about you. Perhaps if I had let you out more you wouldn't act like you do now; a city girl traipsing around like she owns the place. You've managed to get yourself two children and yet no husband. If you'd had any sense at all before you ran off like that, this all would have been so much easier on you. On all of us."

Nico held his breath, heart hammering. His palms felt sweaty and he wiped them on his jeans. He had heard this argument before, but he had been so young at the time he hadn't understood most of it.

He was thankful Will, Cecil, or Lou Ellen could not understand what they were saying, but Nico could feel Will watching his face carefully.

"Do we have to discuss this right now?" Maria asked tightly, pushing a noodle around on her plate.

"Perhaps not. But as I was saying, he should at least go to school, make friends. No matter what you think he is, he's not a fragile rabbit."

"I know that."

Nico scowled. Given his understanding of the situation he could sympathize with his mother. His grandmother knew nothing of Maria's situation. How could she ever tell her parents that there was a war between gods, and that her two children were primary targets? Nico was not sure whether he should speak up or allow history to continue replaying itself and remain silent.

His grandmother spoke directly to Nico now.

"Since your mother seems intent on staying here with us for a while- in our house, I might add- I will be setting the rules. And I have decided that you will be going to school. You will get an education, make some friends, and-"

"No," Maria said sharply. "Don't put such ideas in his head Mother. He's not leaving this house."

"Might I remind you that you're under my roof-,"
"I am still his mother. Not you," Maria retorted.

"So what, you'll never allow him to adjust to the outside world? You can't keep him here as a prisoner Maria! You're not thinking clearly."

"I can and I will," Maria snapped, eyes flashing. She sighed. "Mother, you must understand that that is not my intention. Please mother, there are things going on you don't understand. I know what I'm doing. Just give me some time to get my plans organized and I'll be out of your hair."

"And just where are you planning on going? You don't have a house. You don't have a husband to provide for you. Where will you go exactly?"

Maria was silent before she appeared to come to a decision. Quietly she said, "Across the ocean. I hear it's peaceful- more peaceful- there. I want-" She was silenced by her mother's laugh.

"To America? Are you out of your mind Maria? And how, pray tell, are you planning on getting there? I know you, you will never make it. Family means to much to you and you know no one there."

Maria was quiet. "I'll find a way, a boat or… other means." Nico knew by 'other means' she was thinking of Hades. "I've been thinking and I'd like you to come as well," Maria told her parents. "We cannot stay here, not with the war. It's not ideal for Bianca or Nicolas."

"Nowhere is ideal," Maria's father interjected. "War, famine, poverty- it is not only here with us. It has overrun the world. It is as if Pandora's Box has been sprung. Running to America will not solve anything. What is important now is family."

"Family," Maria repeated to herself. "You said that as long as I can remember, so why does it feel like you both continually push me away?"

"It's not that we want to push you away," said her mother. "It is that we are worried for you. For Bianca and Nico. You are frightened; your solution is to flee but you cannot run from everything. What will happen if this war you speak of extends even further? Where then will you run? You cannot continue like this, and you cannot continue dragging your children along with you."

"It is not myself I am running for," Maria murmured softly.

"It is. It will only hurt them in the end. Maria, if you plan to keep them locked away like this forever, then you have no business being a parent."

"How can you say that?" Maria demanded furiously. "I do know how to raise my children, and I will always do what's best for them! I will be going to America, and when the time arrives I would like for you to accompany me. I know what I am doing."

Her mother sneered. "Oh really? Because if your previous record is anything to go by, I'd say that you don't."

Maria looked confused. "Record? What previous record?"

"Running off by yourself all the time, so intent on springing recklessly into any situation without a second thought as to the consequences. I don't know who this boy's father is, since you so adamantly refuse to speak of him- but he is clearly a worthless, low-down, piece of filth that left you out to dry."

"He never left me," Maria shouted. "I told you; we spent three years together and then he left to
fight. For us. He never abandoned me, he offered me a home- me and Bianca and Nico. I could have gone with him but it was my choice not to. You- you have no idea who he is up against."

"Nico what's going on?" Will whispered, eyes wide. Nico simply shook his head, unable to respond. "You look freaked out."

Maria's mother sat back. "Enlighten me."

Maria looked frozen. "I can't," she whispered. "Please you must believe me. I just- I know I have acted rashly in the past, but I would not throw the dice for anything as important as this!"

Nico wanted to leave. He wondered vaguely what would happen if he tried to shadow travel out of this place.

Will leaned closer to Nico. "Nico are you okay?"

Nico did not know how to answer. He looked over at his friends, feeling numb.

Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil met his eyes, all gripping the arms of their chairs. No one had eaten anything. Nico looked down and saw his hands had curled around his chair as well, his knuckles turning white. He unstuck his throat with some effort and said, "It's fine. Everything's fine."

They could not understand the conversation and for that Nico was grateful. Despite the raised tones Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil had no choice but to take his word for it.

He watched his grandmother as she eyed her daughter critically. "Yes I do believe you would," she said gravely.

Maria had tears in her eyes. "I cannot believe you would say that! You know what? Fine! Stay here! I am leaving whether you approve or not, so don't expect to see me again!"

Nico's heart was pounding. He winced as his grandfather finally stood up. "You listen here. I am sick of you acting like a child. It is time for you to grow up and take some responsibility for your actions. If you believe you must go then go; but Nicolas and Bianca will remain here with your mother and I until you figure out how to-"

"Stop," Nico shouted, jumping up. He felt sick and upset. Across from him Maria was close to tears.

Beside him Will, Cecil, and Lou Ellen had flinched at his outburst. His mother and grandparents froze, likewise surprised. Nico didn't bother speaking in Italian, "Just stop! I won't listen to this anymore!"

Unable to face them he ran from the room.

He was starting to remember.

Hardly paying attention to where his feet were taking him, he ran out of the room, down the hall, and straight to the front door, which he threw open.

He gasped as an icy wave of rain gusted in over the floorboards. Nico hesitated, wondering which-the dining room or the storm- was the lesser of the two evils, when he heard Will trying to excuse himself from the table in a broken attempt at Italian.

Of course Will would try to follow him. It was what the son of Apollo always did. What was even
more horrifying was how relieved Nico felt at the thought.

Hating himself, Nico plunged forward into the downpour.

He made it as far as the fountain, before taking shelter under one of the gargoyles. It wasn't the best hideaway but it was better than nothing. The courtyard, which had been beautiful before, now looked haunted and frightening. Around him the colorful roses were all withered and moth-eaten, crumbling and dissolving under the shower. Raindrops scattered on his skin. The sky was black and vast and starless above him.

"Nico?!"

Will was searching for him.

Nico wondered halfheartedly if the son of Apollo would go back inside or continue searching for him in the storm. Nico closed his eyes.

He knew exactly which Will would choose.

"I'm here," Nico called, not wanting Will to be standing out in the rain.

Will didn't move at first, squinting towards the sound of his voice. Eventually he must have made out the small dark shape huddled by the wet stones because he strode forward.

Will stopped in front of him and glared. Nico stared back, waiting to see if he would get admonished by the son of Apollo or just be enveloped by his usual comforting words.

Will stared at Nico for a few seconds, catching his breath. His blue eyes were large and worried, but as the seconds passed and he looked at Nico, the corners of his mouth began to twitch up.

"What's your problem?" Nico snapped.

"I'm so sorry," Will pressed his lips together, trying not to laugh. "It's just, you- you look so sad. I'm sorry, this isn't funny. Are you okay?"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Nico muttered, confused by Will's reaction. Where was the comforting, caring guy he'd come to expect?

Will forced himself to stop chuckling. "You know you kind of look like Mulan… When she's crying outside in the rain because her dad has to go fight."

Nico stared at him in disbelief. "Why don't you go away and take your weird movies with you."

Will sighed. "I'm sorry, alright? I think the stress is getting to me or something. Seriously though, are you okay?"

"What do you think Solace? Just go back inside. I want to be alone."

"Oh sure. I'll just leave you out here in the rain." Will sat down next to him. "You shouldn't be left alone here. Lou Ellen and Cecil are inside still- we should stick together. I know you're used to doing things solo but you have us now. I'm also sorry that you had to come here. I didn't realize how hard it would be. Did your family always used to fight like that?"

Nico shrugged, uncomfortable with how close Will was sitting to him. His teeth were beginning to chatter and he wanted to lean into the warmth that was radiating from the son of Apollo. He felt that would have been awkward though.
"You're shivering," Will noticed. "Are you cold?"

Nico scowled. "Well yeah. Aren't you?"

"Not really. Actually I've been feeling unusually hot recently. You know, temperature-wise."

Nico laughed softly. "Yeah, I wasn't sure which you meant." Possibly his brain was frozen but it took him a moment to realize how his comment had sounded and he blushed. "Er, that came out wrong."

"You don't have to tell me Death Boy," Will said smartly. "I know how hot I am."

"Tch."

Will looked at him. "I notice you didn't argue with that."

"What! You're ridiculous."

Despite Will's joking, Nico was reminded of when they had sat on the deck in the snow after their meeting with Asbolus, and Will's easy admission about his sexuality. It all seemed so easy for him, for everyone, really, this day and age. Sitting on the fountain, surrounded by his old house, Nico was more aware than ever of how he could never have admitted something like that before he met Will.

"You know I'm glad it's you," said Nico.

Will looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I always thought I'd never see this place again," Nico said slowly. "The day Bianca and I left we promised each other we would only return together or not at all. Don't get me wrong; I still wish I hadn't seen it again, but if I have to come back, I'm glad it's with you."

Will looked over at him. "Thanks," he murmured. He smiled and scuffed his feet through the gravel. The two of them sat that way for a moment, watching the rain fall.

Eventually Will broke the silence.

"I wonder how Lou and Cecil are doing back there. I couldn't understand most of what was said during dinner, but I can recognize a family argument. Was that normal for them?"

Nico pondered that. "I suppose. It's just so much easier to understand my mother's side of it now. I was so young before, and confused, I didn't understand why I was always stuck here, unable to leave."

"You mentioned you couldn't leave the property," said Will. "Was there some sort of protection around it?"

Nico shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised. It would explain a lot. That's probably why she freaked out when she saw that eagle on the gate, it being the sign of Zeus and whatnot."


"Nothing. You uh, also said this place was destroyed. Can I ask what happened?"

Nico chewed his lip. "I'd prefer it if you didn't."
"But-"

"What do you think happened Solace?" he snapped. "Time caught up to us, and Bianca, my mother, and I barely escaped. My grandparents didn't. After that we made our way to New York."

"Oh," Will said quietly. "And then you were put into the Lotus Hotel and Casino?"

"Not until after my mother died too," snapped Nico. "It doesn't matter. It's all in the past. I've moved on."

"I'm sorry," Will said immediately. "I shouldn't have asked. I guess you've sort of lost everyone…"

Nico's scowl deepened and he had to resist the urge to snap at Will, but he managed to stop himself in time. "Thanks for summing it up," he said darkly. "Forget it Will. Look, you don't have to worry- that's never going to happen to you."

Will looked startled. "Huh? What do you mean?"

Nico sighed. "You're worried about your dad, and your siblings, and everything Asbolus said about Tartarus. I don't know how this quest will turn out but you don't have to worry about them, Will. I won't let you lose them like I did."

Nico stood up and Will frowned up at him with a surprised look on his face. He opened his mouth, to say what Nico didn't know.

All of a sudden a muffled scream rang from the house.

They both looked towards it, wide eyed and startled. A series of bangs and shouting followed. This was followed by what sounded like a miniature explosion.

Will leapt to his feet beside Nico.

"What was that?"

"I dunno," Nico said nervously.

Together they jumped up from the fountain and ran towards the house. As they ran, Will drew his bow and nocked an arrow. They thundered up the front steps but when they reached the front door it was to discover that it would not budge. "It's locked!" Nico shouted. He smacked his palm angrily against it. "Ow."

"Look out," Will ordered. Nico looked at him, startled, but moved out of the way.

His eyes widened. "Wait, you're not gonna try to-"

To his amazement Will gave the door a thunderous kick which sent it bursting open.

Nico stared at him in a mixture of astonishment and annoyance.

"Don't look at me like that," Will muttered. "You know, you made it sound like I was all helpless back there. See, that wasn't very helpless was it?"

"Great," said Nico. "You can kick Python when you see him."

They ran into the house and back to the dining room. Nico stepped through the doorway, shocked by what he saw. The dining room was completely empty; there were neither plates nor glasses upon
the table, and certainly no people. There was not an inkling that the room had been occupied at all recently; cobwebs draped the chandelier, the tabletop was also swathed in a fine layer of dust with not even any fingerprints or blemishes of any kind. No Maria, no grandparents, and definitely no Cecil and Lou Ellen.

Everything was still and silent.

The house was abandoned.

"LOU!" Will's voice rang through the house. "CECIL!"

"Shh," Nico hissed, turning on him.

"What?"

"I said quiet. It could still be here!"

Will raised an eyebrow. "What could still be here?"

"Whatever attacked them," said Nico.

"You think they've been attacked?" asked Will.

Nico's scowl deepened. "No Blondie, I think they screamed in excitement because they were offered dessert. Of course I think they were attacked, or taken, or... something. We need to stay together and find them. Then we need to get out of here."

Nico led the way back into the hallway, peering cautiously around the corner. It was clear. He made his way towards the front door. Will followed behind him. "But what about Lou and Cecil? We can't leave them!"

"We won't," Nico said shortly. "We'll find them as soon as we find somewhere safer."

"But there's nowhere-"

"Hey guys!"

Will yelped. He and Nico jumped violently and spun towards the new voice.

A pudgy, pillow of a boy stood behind them, blonde hair tufting up into a cow-lick and sleepy butterscotch eyes glinting in the light. "I've been looking everywhere for you," he mumbled through a wide yawn.

"Clovis," Nico gasped, stepping forward. "You scared the crap out of us. What are you doing here?"

The plump boy yawned widely. "Hello to you too, Nico. Annabeth mentioned something about you guys going through the Labyrinth of Dreams. I came as fast as I could to tell you; don't do it."

"Erm..." Nico and Will exchanged uneasy looks. "Yeah, it's a little late for that..."

Clovis winced. "Dang. I was afraid of that. I guess it makes sense, otherwise I wouldn't be able to talk to you right now." He yawned again and stretched. "So how is it?"

"It's totally weird awful," said Will. "We somehow jumped a century and had dinner with Nico's family."
Clovis nodded slowly. "Interesting… you'll have to tell me the details later. Listen, you need to find a way out of here quick. The longer you stay, the easier it is to get lost. I don't have to tell you how terrible it would be if you got stuck in here for eternity. You might go completely insane, or end up paralyzed."

"Believe me, that's not our plan," Will said hurriedly. "Wait… paralyzed?"

"You know, sleep paralysis. Stuck in limbo." Clovis waved his hand. He stifled another yawn. "My brothers are huge fans of that. Come to think of it, so am I. I wish I could sleep forever… but a guy's got to eat at some point. Say," Clovis looked excited suddenly. "Will, could you hit me up with an IV drip or something when you get back? That'd do the job."

"Um, no. Definitely not. What kind of doctor do you think I am?" Will demanded, shocked.

"Guys, we're off topic," snapped Nico. "Clovis, do you have any idea on how we can get out of here?"

Clovis thought for a moment. Nico watched as he squinted around at his surroundings. "This house… it's yours?" he asked Nico, who nodded. "Well there's always something a little off with dreams. I'd suggest looking for something that isn't right, something that shouldn't be here." Clovis eyed Nico. "You know how when you're having a dream and you never- well, almost never- wake up until the worst moment? It doesn't matter if it's good or bad, just that it's a turning point, so to speak. You need to find that in here, but it won't be easy. I don't think it'll be nearly as easy to get out as it was to get in. The Oneiroi won't want to let you go easily."

Nico felt his heart sinking at the words. How was he supposed to find something unusual here when he could barely remember anything at all? Clovis was right- escaping was going to be a challenge.

"But what about Lou and Cecil?" Will asked, frustrated.

"What about them?" asked Clovis.

"They're missing," Nico said shortly. An idea struck him. "Hey Clovis, can you sense where they are?"

The son of Hypnos cocked his head to the side. He appeared to be concentrating, but after a moment he shook his head. "Nope. I'm sorry guys, but I don't think they're in here at all."

"They're gone," Will asked in disbelief. "Where? How did they get out?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Clovis. "I don't sense them anywhere close though. Maybe they were taken, or something."

"No offense Clovis," said Will. "But I'm starting to really dislike the godly-side of your siblings."

Clovis shrugged. "Yeah, they never invited me to Thanksgiving dinner either… probably for the best. Imagine the food coma we'd have to sleep off." He checked his watch. "Only another minute before REM sleep. Sorry guys I gotta go! Good luck- you'll need it."

Will POV

After Clovis left, Will and Nico sat side by side in the deserted hallway, at a loss for what to do next. Will yawned, and was ironically overcome with the realization of how exhausted he was. Could they even sleep in this place?
In the center of the hall, the grand staircase led upwards into darkness. Will wondered what was up there. Bedrooms, he supposed, including Nico’s old bedroom. He wanted to ask Nico but after their discussion by the fountain he figured he would really be pushing it. The last thing he wanted was a pissed-off Nico as well. Well, more pissed-off.

Will shivered. The both of them were still soaked from the downpour outside. Will realized suddenly that if he was actually feeling the cold, then Nico definitely was. Or he should be. Will had long since noticed that Nico seemed rather apathetic when it came to his own needs or safety.

"Are you cold?" he asked the son of Hades anyway.

Nico hunched his shoulders. "No." His answer was short and cautioned against any further conversation. His brow was furrowed and he appeared deep in thought. Despite his answer, Will noticed that he was shivering slightly.

"You should at least take your jacket off," said Will. "It's soaked through. You'll make yourself sick."

"Whatever," Nico muttered, but he did as Will suggested. "How are we going to get out of here?" he questioned quietly. "Clovis said to look for something out-of-place, but I don't remember much. How am I supposed to know when I see it?"

"I don't know." Will answered honestly. "But I'm too tired to think right now. And who knows what happened to Lou and Cecil? Gods," Will rubbed his eyes. "If something happens to them, it'll be all my fault. I'm supposed to be leading this quest. They're my best friends. If something happens to them I'll never forgive myself."

"Stop that," Nico said sharply. "You always put too much pressure on yourself. If anything it's my fault for running off. Besides, Lou and Cecil are smart. They'll be okay. Heck, they may be safer than us right now." He concluded his statement with a yawn.

Will did not really believe that, but he nodded anyways.

It was dark out, and still raining, and Will wasn't sure how much longer he could stay awake.

They ended up making make-shift beds on the floor after Nico located a couple of old blankets in a closet.

"Good night, Nico," Will murmured quietly, staring at the dark ceiling.

Nico took a moment to respond. Will watched his hunched shoulders for a minute before he replied quietly, "'Night Solace."

Will frowned at the use of his surname but didn't comment. Instead he lay there, thoughts of Apollo, and of Lou Ellen and Cecil churning in his head. Eventually he drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke it was upon an icy cement floor.

Will blinked in a daze and looked around. He was in a long narrow hallway, built in its entirety out of cement. The ends receded each way into darkness. With each of his movements, an echo whispered back. He could sense pressure on all sides of the walls, as if the corridor were entirely encased.

Encased in water.
With no other option in sight, he stood and began walking. And walking. He walked for what felt like an hour, but eventually the cement hallway intersected another. He turned right, hoping for an exit, but stopped short when he saw who was there.

It was a blonde guy kneeling in the center of a room. His wrists were shackled. He appeared to shiver in the cold drafts that wafted through the tunnels.

Will swallowed hard before he found his voice. "Dad?"

Apollo looked up. He looked to be in pain but Will could not see any wounds or inflictions upon his body. Will's doctor instinct was to run forward immediately and begin looking over the man surprised him. This was his father, a God, not a patient. The thought did not make it any easier to see him like this.

It was far worse.

When Apollo spoke his voice was grating and harsh. "Hello, Will. I have been trying to speak with you for a while now. It's nice to see I have finally reached you. I have an important message for you."

Will's heart beat fast. He longed to run forward and grab Apollo, drag him to his feet, try to rip the shackles off with his bare hands if he had to, but something stayed him in place.

Apollo hunched over suddenly, coughing harshly. Will's stomach twisted on itself as he watched, but still he was too afraid to move forward. He watched until his father recovered and unsteadily pushed himself back up. "I know you have brought it upon yourself to rescue me. My message is this; Turn back. It is too late."

Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

So... yes. This is obviously another two-part chapter. I was at war with myself over this chapter. I couldn't decide whether to tell Nico's past through flashbacks, as memories, dreams, or actually reliving it... anyways, I thought the last would be the most easily understood.

Thanks for reading and happy holidays!
"What Dreams May Come"

Chapter 11:
What Dreams May Come

"What?" Will stammered, heart thudding in his chest, as he watched Apollo tug half-heartedly at the chains around his wrists. "What do you mean it's too late? I'm coming to rescue you!"

Apollo looked up at his son, frowning. "Rescue me? Just you?"

"No," Will exclaimed, stepping closer. "I'm leading a quest to save you. We met Asbolus in Elysium and he said that Tartarus is stirring, that he might be trying to escape his prison."

"Elysium? A quest?" Apollo said softly to himself, looking sidetracked. "I can see I've missed quite a bit in my absence. Start at the beginning; who are your companions for this quest?"

"Lou Ellen, Cecil, and Nico are with me," Will told him. "We received a prophecy before we left but Rachel said it didn't come from you."

Apollo was frowning. "No, it did not. Regrettably I no longer have control of Delphi."

Apollo's words only confirmed what Will already suspected.

"It's not just that. I've been having dreams. They've been telling me we should seek out the Oneiroi, but we're pretty sure it's the Oneiroi who are sending them anyways. Some of them, at least. I heard… I heard they were working for Python now."

Apollo had a dark look on his face by the time Will finished. "Python, that jerk!" he cursed. "Listen Will, I know you have good intentions but if Python is sending you strange prophecies, or having them sent, then no doubt he knows you are on your way. If you have instructions to seek out Morpheus and his siblings as well, it is all the more reason to stay away. Morpheus' relationship with Olympus has always been unsteady. Zeus had him under close watch after putting all of Manhattan to sleep during the first war. I can't believe he has managed to get away with all of this without Zeus realizing. Listen Will, this is not a quest to save me, it is a trap."

"But-" Will hesitated before he asked his next question, unsure whether or not he wanted to hear the answer. "But what Asbolus said about Tartarus, that's not true is it? Tartarus can't escape. He's imprisoned."

"I'm not sure," Apollo admitted. "I did not believe it was possible for him to escape, he's certainly never managed it before, but Python's been sticking his nose into all kinds of things that are none of his business. If his line of questioning is anything to go by…” Apollo trailed off with a wince. "What has Zeus said about all of this?" he asked suddenly, curiously.

"Er…" Will winced internally. "Not much. But you know, he never really likes to share stuff with us…” he muttered awkwardly. "But I think Jason Grace was going to try talking to him."

"Oh." Apollo said quietly. "I see."

He looked down at the chains around his hands. He looked so dejected that Will cast his mind around desperately trying to think of anything at all positive to say to him. Instead he found himself wondering whether he should mention that the vial with his powers disintegrated in an explosion of
light. A second look at his dad's face and he decided against it. "We're going to get you out," Will promised again.

"You can't rescue me Will," Apollo said bitterly. "If the Gods won't help, then you stand no chance."

"But-" Will's eyes stung and the lump in his throat seemed to grow larger. "But I keep having these dreams. The Games of Pythia, I think that- it looks like you're going to- I think Python plans to-"

Will couldn't get the words out. How did he tell his father that he thought Python was going to have him killed in a week, simply for a show of power?

"Will listen to me," Apollo said, surprisingly intense. "What is important is that you watch out for your brothers and sisters. You need to get back to camp and help as best you can. Something dangerous is coming and if you can't tell by now, no one seems to know how or when it will strike."

"But-"

"This is not up for discussion. You are the elected leader of your cabin; you need to go back to camp and be there for them. There is nothing you can do here. Coming after me will help nothing."

"You don't know that! Olympus needs you. You can't just give up!" Will yelled, blinking back tears. He wasn't sure if he was sad for Apollo or angry about his apparent surrender.

"I have not finished yet," Apollo said, eyes flashing dangerously. Will closed his mouth, abashed, but also not quite ready to give up just yet. "I need you to deliver a message to your grandfather."

"My grandfather?" Will asked in confusion, thinking of his grandfather down in Texas.

Apollo waved his hand. "You know, Zeus. Actually, I have two messages for you to give him."

"Ah- okay." Will decided not to mention the fact that he was currently stuck in a Labyrinth with no idea how to escape. There would be no point in worrying Apollo further. "What do you want me to say?"

"First, tell him he sucks."

Will's eyes widened. "Er, I don't know if I'm comfortable relaying that message to the King of the Gods."

Apollo shrugged. "Meh, fine, Austin can give him that message. I'll sacrifice him." (Will assumed he was joking.) "Also, tell Zeus that I lied about the keys. It should buy a little time."

Will blinked. "O-okay," he said hesitantly. When Apollo said keys, could he possibly mean…?

"I can't say anything more here," said Apollo. "I don't want to risk it. Anyone could be listening in…"

Will opened his eyes to see that he was back on the wood floor of the Nico's house. Bright sunlight filtered in through the windows, lighting the hallway in a warm glow. It took him a second to remember where he was, and when he did he turned to check on Nico. The son of Hades was curled up under his blanket, snoring softly. Little puffs of air hit his bangs, making them brush against his nose. Will couldn't help but grin. It figured, he thought. Even in Dreamland Nico wouldn't miss a chance to sleep in.
"Nico," Will whispered. He didn't really want to wake him up when he was being so peaceful but it seemed better than waiting for an indefinite amount of time for the son of Hades to wake up on his own.

Will shook his shoulder. "Nico, wake up."

Nico stirred, and pushed himself up with a groan. "Ugh… what?"

"I talked with my dad," Will said hurriedly.

Nico blinked at him. "How?"

"In a dream…" Will quickly relayed the contents of his dream. Nico listened closely, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"He wants us to get a message to Zeus?" Nico asked critically, when Will had finished.

"Yeah. I've got no idea how to manage it though. I didn't tell him where we are," Will admitted.

"I guess we'll tell Zeus as soon as we get out," said Nico. He hesitated, watching Will's face before he asked his next question. "He also told you not to come for him," he reminded Will quietly.

Will looked down. "I know. I don't know what to do. He said I should turn back, and help my siblings instead. He said if the Gods wouldn't help him, no one could. He made- I mean, it's almost seemed like he didn't want me to come. Like he thought someone else could have done a better job. Someone like Austin, or Kayla," Will finished in a small voice. To his horror he felt his eyes prickle. He blinked them away furiously before Nico could notice.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Will repeated to himself.

Nico scowled suddenly. "We are going to find our way out of this cursed place. I've had enough of this house and being humiliated. Then we will decided what to do."

With that Nico pushed himself to his feet. Will blinked at his abrupt mood change, but followed in suit.

Their jackets had mostly dried overnight, and Nico was about to put his on when Will stopped him.

"Hold on," Will motioned towards the front door, where bright sunlight was filtering through. He opened it and stepped out.

The blast of warmth that met him was possibly the most welcoming thing he'd experienced as of late. The sun was rising rapidly in the sky already. There was a chilly breeze that raised goosebumps on his arms but even that was acceptable after last night's storm and traveling through the Underworld. Will was so caught up in the feeling he failed to notice the change in the courtyard.

"Will…" Nico stopped next to him. Will had to stop basking in the glory that was the sun for a moment to notice what he was looking at. The leaves upon all the trees were rich reds and golds, leaving blankets of leaves on the ground. It was indubitably autumn, somehow.

"I don't understand," Will muttered. "What, did we sleep for months? No wonder you were so easy to wake up today."

Nico rolled his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. The dream just changed again. Also, I have never slept
for months at a time! This is just the Oneiroi messing with us. I swear to Hades, when I see Morpheus I'm going to kick his-"

"Okay, okay," Will interrupted, not wanting Nico to anger the Gods who had them trapped and at their mercy. "Let's just think of a plan. Clovis said we need to find something unusual and get out that way."

"I can't remember any specifics about this place," Nico muttered. "How will I know if something is unusual?"

"Maybe we should just take a look around and see if anything sparks a memory."

Nico stared at him, brow furrowed. Will got the impression he was trying to decide whether to get mad at him. Evidently he decided against it because he reluctantly nodded.

"Let's start outside," Will said, stepping forward and walking down the porch steps. "You know, it sucks that I left our bags with Cecil and Lou last night. I should have grabbed at least one of them, I just didn't expect this to happen. I guess we'll have to hope they're still with them somewhere. Where do you want to start looking?"

"I dunno," Nico muttered. He looked around, squinting like the bright sunlight pained him.

"What's that way?" Will pointed down the road they had come from the previous night. In the distance he could make out an off-branch but it faded beyond a hillside before he could see where it led.

"That goes to a small town," said Nico. "But it's too far to walk without a car."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Really? You seemed pretty willing to walk us through miles of the Underworld, but you won't walk in the sunshine to a town?"

Nico crossed his arms looking annoyed. "It was the way we had to go. That is not the way we have to go."

"How do you know?" Will challenged.

Nico spun towards Will, looking angry. "Because if this is some sort of hell I'm supposed to be in, it'll be here. Not there!"

Will blinked, surprised. "You think this is hell? I would have thought, for you, it was… you know… better." It was the wrong thing to say.

"You don't know anything," Nico snarled.

Apparently he was done with the conversation because he went stomping off before Will could respond. Nico turned and began walking towards the side of the house like he wanted to go around it.

"Where are you going?" Will called after him.

At first he thought Nico was going to ignore him but then he snapped, "There's an orchard out back."

"Oh."

Will ran after him. He settled pace beside Nico and snuck a look at his face. He was still clearly
angry and had one of his worser scowls upon his face. Will couldn't resist muttering, "So I guess this means you can sleep for months and still wake up on the wrong side of the bed."

Taunting him probably wasn't the best idea but Will couldn't resist. And yes, he was a little confused as to what had set off Nico's mood. He wanted to get to the bottom of it.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked the son of Hades.

Nico looked taken aback. "No, why?"

"You," Will said quickly. Even with his long legs he had to put in some effort to keep up with the angry pace Nico had set. "You just got mad all of a sudden and I don't know why."

Nico was silent. When he didn't respond after a minute Will believed he truly was going to ignore him. When Nico opened his mouth to respond Will braced himself to be yelled at.

"Sorry."

Will looked at him in confusion. "Why are you apologizing?" he asked. "I just wanted to know why you're mad."

Nico sighed. "No particular reason, I guess," he said carefully. "I just want to get out."

"We will get out," Will said firmly. "And then we'll find Lou Ellen and Cecil."

Nico looked testily at him. "You really think so?"

"Well yeah..." Will muttered. Suddenly he was worried. "Don't you?"

Nico's shoulders relaxed slightly. "Course I do," he muttered. "I'm just glad you think so. It annoys me when you get mopey."

"Seriously?" Will asked. He almost wanted to laugh. "Wait, so you're telling me you were all grumpy just because I was acting pitiful and you didn't like it?"

"You being pitiful is a rather a lot to take," Nico snapped.

Will rolled his eyes. "You know, most people would try to be comforting when their friend is upset, not act all prissy and pissed-off."

"You're one to talk," Nico huffed. "At least I don't follow you around throwing unhelpful movie references at you."

"At least I would understand the references," Will stopped walking suddenly. "Woah... it's beautiful."

Rows of trees sprung from the ground before them. They were larger than Will expected, with surprisingly thin trunks for the amount of fruit they bore. Most had fallen from the branches, but the smell was still intoxicating. Will inhaled deeply. The orchard was a decent size—nothing close to a huge commercial-sized one of course, but large enough to be excited about.

It was also, Will reckoned, large enough to get lost in.

"Uh, do you know where you're going?" Will asked when Nico continued walking into the trees.

"Maybe," Nico answered. When Will continued looking at him questioningly, he sighed. "I think I
recall there being something on the other end: a barn, or shed, or something. It might be worth checking out."

"Ah. Okay."

Together they walked through the trees. Will had never been in an orchard, but he had seen them in movies or read about them in books. It seemed childish but he felt strangely excited getting to walk through one, even a small one.

Nico seemed to be enjoying it as well.

"I used to love this place," he commented off-handedly. "During the summer Bianca and I would make lemonade together out here. It was so much better than that store-bought stuff nowadays. We used brown sugar-" Nico faltered and looked over at Will, blushing. "It's stupid. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter," Will said immediately. "That settles it; as soon as this quest is over we're making lemonade. Er, you know, if that's okay with you. And watching movies on Netflix."

Nico actually smiled slightly. "Actually, that sounds pretty nice." He looked away quickly and was silent.

"I can't believe your family never let you have any friends," Will said suddenly. "How did you not…" He trailed off. He had been about to ask how Nico had never gotten lonely, but then realized that he probably had been.

"It's not like I never had any friends," Nico said hesitantly. "Before we moved I had some. Back in the city."

Will was relieved to hear it. "Still, it's kind of sad that you were so alone out here. They should have visited, or-"

"Maybe they did," Nico snapped.

Will was silent for a moment before quietly asking, "Did they?"

Nico looked like he regretted saying anything. He frowned deeply. "One of them," he said shortly. "It was disastrous."

"Why? What happened?"

Nico scowled. "It's none of your business."

Will frowned. "You know, you shouldn't say such dramatic things if you don't want me to ask!"

Nico didn't answer immediately. "Fine. If you must know I had a friend- I don't remember his name. Marco, or something- who visited for my birthday. He was my best friend back in the city. Somehow we convinced our parents to let him stay for the summer." He paused and chewed his lip. "You already know I wasn't supposed to leave the property. Well, he convinced me to. We were playing some stupid kid's game, hide and seek or something like that, and he made fun of me for always doing what I was told. I still refused to go outside the gate though."

"When it was his turn to hide, I searched for a long time and still couldn't find him. I finally realized he must have hid out there even though I told him not to… So I climbed over the fence and tried looking for him."
"And?" asked Will.

Nico hunched his shoulders. "I didn't find him, but there was some guy out there. He asked about me, and told me to go with him. His eyes were this weird blue like I'd never seen, and it started raining really hard – it always rained back then though- but I remember being scared of him. When I tried to turn around and leave, he grabbed me and tried to drag me with him. I started yelling and then there was an explosion… I don't remember much, but my dad was there suddenly. Hades scared him off. I suppose he must have been some son of Zeus, trying to find me for his father…"

Will swallowed. "You mentioned the house was destroyed. So… the explosion, was it… the house?"

"No," said Nico. "I woke up back there. I guess my dad must have brought me back. It was too late though. Our location had been discovered. My dad got me, Bianca, and our mother out that night. My grandparents didn't understand- they refused to come. My mom tried to convince them, but- they were stubborn. My dad took us ahead of them. When he came back to get them… it was too late. The other Gods must have come looking for us. The whole house was ashes. Of course, this is just what my dad told me." Nico stopped talking abruptly and turned his face away from Will.

Will watched him with a lump in his throat. He reached out to touch Nico's arm. "I'm sorry I asked, Nico."

"It's fine," Nico mumbled shortly. He shook his head. "All that, simply because of a stupid mistake I made. They say curiosity killed the cat, well that's still better than bringing your whole family down with you."

"It wasn't your fault Nico. You never could have known. Anyone would have tried to do the same. You were eight years old and playing a game with your friend."

Nico scoffed softly. "Yeah well, that's the last time I was ever allowed to have friends. My mother all but locked us up after that."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but… that was wrong of her," Will said quietly.

"She was just trying to protect us," Nico argued feebly. He sighed heavily. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

They walked on in silence, Nico lost in thought, Will pondering what he'd just learned. When they reached the other side of the orchard they were quickly drawn from their thoughts.

Nico and Will stared.

A large house, two stories, with blue panel siding and a white front porch sat there innocently. A couple of white deck chairs rocked gently in the breeze.

"This… is not my shed," Nico muttered, looking utterly baffled.

It took Will a second to clear his throat from the shock of what he was seeing.

"I know," he said hoarsely.

Nico looked sharply at him. "What you mean 'you know'?" he asked. His eyes widened. "Oh wait… don't tell me. This is your home?"

Will shifted uncomfortably. "Uh, not exactly. It's the home I stayed at… as a kid."
Nico frowned. "I don't understand."

"A foster home," Will explained.

Nico continued frowning like he still didn't get it.

"Nico..." Will muttered awkwardly. "You do know I'm adopted right?"

Will promptly concluded that Nico did not know this, because the son of Hades' jaw all but hit the grass.

Cecil

Cecil groaned and cracked an eye open. His head pounded and throbbed, but he forced himself to sit up. A wave of nausea hit him hard and he took a deep breath and held still, waiting for it to pass. It was then he noticed that a hand was chained to a wall. Not again, he thought, remembering the Lotus Casino. He tried to look around. His surrounding were dark but he appeared to be in a cave of some sort. It was chilly inside and he shivered.

"Lou?" he whispered.

At first he was met only with his own whisper echoed back to him but then a familiar girl's voice asked, "Cecil? Are you awake?"

"Yeah," he groaned. "Where are you? What happened?"

"I dunno," said Lou Ellen. Her voice came from somewhere to his right. There was a scuffle and a clatter of chains but that was it. As his eyes slowly adjusted he began to make out her form. "Are you okay? I woke up a few minutes ago but I couldn't wake you. I tried to look around a little but it's dark and I didn't make it very far." She rattled the cuff around her hand.

"Oh. Find anything?"

"Er, no actually."

Cecil winced and tried to think back to what had happened earlier. All he could remember was sitting around the dinner table with Nico's family and wishing desperately that Will and Nico would return. It had been uncomfortable. Maria and her parents had continued to argue and then gone quiet, and then...

"They attacked us," Cecil muttered aloud. He looked at Lou Ellen in a sort of late-panic. "They were the Oneiroi all along!"

"I know," she said tersely. "But I don't think Nico and Will are here with us. At least, not in this room. They must have left them behind for some reason. That's odd- I thought they wanted Will for their twisted plans."

"Yeah," Cecil agreed. "We need to figure out how to escape..."

"Say that a little louder, why don't you?" whispered a third, unfamiliar voice.

Cecil jumped slightly. It sounded like a kid, a boy. They both peered into the darkness and after a moment Cecil began to make out the vague outline of another person.

"Who are you?" he asked.
The kid snorted. "More like, who are you? I was here first!" He rattled his chained hands as if to make a point.

"We're…” Lou Ellen hesitated. "…Demigods. From Camp Half-Blood. I'm Lou Ellen, daughter of Hecate, and this is Cecil- son of Hermes."

The kid was quiet for a few seconds. "I see… well, my names Aaron. Son of Hypnos. I must say, I can't believe coming here seemed like a good idea a few years ago."

"Years?" Lou Ellen said in alarm. "Are you telling me that your… ah, siblings have been keeping you locked up for years?"

"As close as I can tell. My powers have been blocked so I can't communicate with anyone, but that doesn't matter now. Today's my lucky day!"

Cecil was instantly suspicious of this kid. What demigod went missing for years, without anyone realizing? Of course it did explained why he didn't sound familiar; neither Cecil nor Lou Ellen had been at camp for more than just a couple years. "Why's it your lucky day?" Cecil asked warily.

"Because you can help me escape! You're a son of Hermes, aren't you good at that sort of thing?" Aaron asked Cecil.

"Er…” Not if my previous record is anything to go by, Cecil thought. "I guess we have to try…”

He looked up at the metal band around his hand. It was old and rusting. Perhaps it would simply break with enough pressure? There were rocks within the cave… Cecil quickly pushed the idea away. Banging on it with a rock would make far too much noise. Perhaps he could pick it?

"Hey Lou, do you happen to have a bobby pin in your hair?" Cecil asked.

Lou Ellen looked at him. "No, sorry," she said, sounding regretful.

"It's fine," said Cecil. "Okay, look around for anything to pick a lock with." They searched, scrambling. Lou Ellen kicked some stones around, presumably looking for one that might happen to be small enough.

"You might want be a little gentler with that," the boy whispered suddenly.

"What, why?" asked Lou Ellen. Across from her the boy looked above her head. They followed his gaze to see a dozen or so sharp stalactites. Lou Ellen's eyes widened.

"Wouldn't want those to fall on you," the boy said conversationally. "I'm pretty sure certain frequencies can do that."

After that they moved much slower and more quietly. Eventually Cecil found a small twig. It was still larger than what was preferred, but it would have to do. Hopefully it wouldn't break.

Picking each of the locks took far longer than he would have liked on any account. He supposed it was lucky there wasn't some sort of protection spell on them. After what seemed like an excruciatingly slow process he finally got himself free. The kid across the room held out his cuff but Cecil shook his head. "Sorry, she's next. Then you."

Aaron scowled. Cecil ignored him and began working at the locks. Eventually all three of them were free, rubbing their wrists, and looking around.
"Great!" Aaron said, standing. "Let's get out of here!"

"Wait," said Lou Ellen. "We can't leave yet. We have friends. We can't just leave them behind."

The kid scowled. "Where are they?"

Cecil and Lou Ellen exchanged looks. "We think they're still in the Labyrinth," said Lou Ellen.

The kid raised an eyebrow.

"And what? You want to go back in there? There's no way in Hades I'm going in there. The only chance your friends have is waiting for Morpheus to free them, or escaping themselves. There is nothing we can do for them. Now if you want to get out of here, you'll follow me!" He spun on his heel and began walking off. Cecil and Lou Ellen had little choice but to follow him; it was that or stay behind and wait for the Oneiroi to come back for them. The kid peered around the entryway to their particular cavern, and then chose to go left.

"Do you even know where you're going?" Cecil asked the boy, trailing after him.

He looked hesitant. "I have a good idea. They've moved me around quite a bit over the years."

Cecil still didn't think his story quite matched up. "Why did they keep you? What did they want?"

The boy looked at him darkly. "None of your business."

"Wait," hissed Lou Ellen. "What about our weapons? And our bags?" She looked upset and Cecil knew why. Her mirror had been particularly important to her, a gift from her grandmother.

"She's right," he told Aaron. "We can't leave without our things. Do you know where they might be?"

"Seriously?" The boy sighed. "You two are an annoying couple, aren't you?"

Cecil fidgeted. "Oh, uh, we're not a couple..." he muttered awkwardly.

The boy stared at him in confusion which quickly turned to amusement. "Uh oh, did I strike a nerve? I didn't even mean it like that you know. Just that, you know, there's two of you. 'Couple'."

Cecil could feel his face heating up fast now. Lou Ellen spoke up, "You're not very pleasant for a son of Hypnos, you know. No offense."

The kids smirk faded. "Sorry. I guess I've forgotten my manners since I've been cooped up here."

"It's fine," Lou Ellen muttered. "So do you know where our things are?"

"Maybe," the kid said shortly. "We'll have to be careful. Hopefully Morpheus and the other two will be too busy keeping an eye on your friends, to pay mind to us. Follow me, and be quiet."

They continued cautiously down the hallway until it branched off. The kid turned and followed it. Cecil did not know how long they walked, but he tried to remember which turns they made. Eventually, unfortunately, even he lost track. At last they turned into another room, a large cavernous place like where they had started. Against the far wall a whole assortment of weapons, bags, and other various items lay. A great many of them Cecil didn't recognize, but some he did.

"Hey," Lou Ellen breathed sharply, "This looks like Will's!" She reached out and touched one of the bows strung along the wall. Cecil saw that she was almost correct... but not quite.
"It's not Will's," he said slowly, eyeing the engravings in the wood. "But it does appear to be another child of Apollo's. Who knows how old it is…"

Lou Ellen looked horrified. "Oh…"

"This must be the stuff from everyone that's been lost in the Labyrinth…" Cecil murmured. They searched through things quickly but did not come upon any of their own items. Finally Cecil resigned himself to having to make do with a small sword. He did his best not to wonder whose it had been.

Cecil noticed the growing concern etched across Lou Ellen's face…

"We can keep looking for your mirror-" Cecil began, but she was already shaking her head.

"It's no use. It's too risky. We need to keep moving."

Aaron looked pleased. "That's the first smart thing either of you has said. Let's go!"

"Wait," said Cecil. "Don't you want to grab a weapon? Just in case?"

The boy shook his head. "Nah."

Cecil frowned at him. So that was strange, not arming himself. Perhaps he had been here so long that he no longer remembered how to fight anyways.

"You're sure?" he asked Aaron. The boy nodded.

Before they left Lou Ellen grabbed a dagger from the wall. She hesitated and looked back at the bow. "I'm not leaving this," she said quietly, before grabbing the bow as well.

They crept back along the way they had come. Cecil couldn't believe the kid actually knew what he was doing. "Does this all seem a little too easy to you?" he whispered to Lou Ellen as they walked.

She let out a shaky breath. "Yeah… but I don't know what other choice we have. We can hardly just wander around lost and waiting for someone to find us."

It was true but it didn't comfort Cecil much. As they continued he began to hear a sound, a soft whisper that grew louder and louder. He realized it sounded like gusting wind, and the crash of waves.

The boy stopped all of a sudden. "That way," he said, pointing down a tunnel. In the distance Cecil could see light. "That's the way out. You should go."

Lou Ellen and Cecil stared. "I don't understand," Cecil said, "You're not coming?"

The boy looked behind him nervously. "There's something I must do first," he muttered. "I'll be fine. But you two need to go! Now." He stood there, waiting for them to leave.

"No!" Lou Ellen whispered edgily. "We're not leaving you behind. And we also aren't leaving our friends!" She turned to Cecil. "Maybe we should go back and search around some more. I don't like the thought of getting any farther from Will and Nico."
Aaron scowled. "Are you two crazy? I already told you, you can't go back into that Labyrinth. Just leave now, while you can. I'm sure your friends can take care of themselves."

Lou Ellen frowned at him, gripping the bow she was holding tighter. "Why are you so concerned if we go or not? And where are you sneaking off too?"

"None of your business. Look," Aaron said placatingly, "I'm giving you a chance to escape. Just take it. Don't ask questions."

"You're acting weird," Cecil told the kid. "We're not going anywhere until you explain yourself."

The kid eyed him for a few seconds, looking annoyed.

Abruptly the look of urgent frustration vanished from his face. He stood up straighter and said with a crooked sort of jeer; "Well, there you have it then. You two just don't know what's good for you," he looked at Lou Ellen- "-do you Stinky?"

"Huh?" Lou Ellen cocked her head in bewilderment. "I'm sorry? Stinky?"

"Lou, wait," Cecil said suddenly, horrible understanding striking him. He pulled the daughter of Hecate back. "It's that lady with the dodos- Agnes. Or whatever her name was."

The boy smirked. "It's Ag-nete, sweetie," he simpered at Cecil. "Do get it right."

There was a blinding flash of light and then a young blonde woman stood before them, smiling and appearing quite pleased with herself.

"You can shapeshift?" Cecil gasped, backing away.

"Don't be silly child. It's just a few tricks I've picked up from my ancestors as well as a dash of mist. I'm surprised you," she pointed at Lou Ellen, "didn't recognize it."

"I can't believe you're still here," Lou Ellen snarled. "Skulking around Morpheus and his brothers? But whatever," she said, "You've dug your own grave, I suppose. Zeus will never forgive you for betraying him and selling out his son. And when Python is destroyed you'll have nowhere else to run to."

Agnete laughed, clasping her hands together in delight.

"Such big words from a scrawny little girl. Look around, Daughter of Hecate, do you see Zeus anywhere? I think not. No, the only ones digging their own graves are all those cursed Gods upstairs who think they are oh, so, special. Of course, they've been working on that for an eternity. It's nice knowing that they will finally face the consequences of their actions. Of course, I fear not even Tartarus' prison will be large enough to fit their egos."

Lou Ellen gasped. Cecil reached to his side to draw his sword only to discover that it had vanished.

"Agnete," a voice spoke sharply behind him. Cecil and Lou Ellen spun, to see three men standing there.

Cecil's heart jumped into his throat. Beside him Lou Ellen took a half-step back. It was the one in front who had spoken.

"You talk too much," Morpheus continued. He cast a lazy glance at the two demigods before him. "It's a shame you two refuse to leave without your friends. I was prepared to spare you. You see,
minimizing the collateral damage would have been far less suspicious than, say, having all four of you go missing around our home."

Cecil recognized him from the Manhattan battle. He must have been reining in his powers now in order to keep them from passing out, but still Cecil felt himself growing tired in his presence. He bit back a yawn.

It was Lou Ellen who found the courage to speak. "You know what would be even less suspicious? If you let all four of us go..." she tried timidly.

Morpheus chuckled, a grating sound. "Nice try, little girl. But I need the other two- both of them. The Son of Apollo and Hades' Spawn. Unfortunately I suppose you must die now."

"W-wait," Cecil said suddenly. "We change our minds; we'll go. You can have Will and Nico!"

"Cecil-!" Lou Ellen looked at him sharply, clearly upset. Cecil shot her a warning glance. He did not mean it how she suspected she thought; they could try to escape from these caves first and then double back to save Will and Nico. As a son of Hermes it was in his nature to take a more elusive and secretive approach.

Morpheus sighed. "How I wish you could. Unfortunately Agnete here could not keep her mouth shut as usual and now we have a bit of a conundrum on our hands." He looked pointedly at Lou Ellen and Cecil. "You know too much."

"So," he clapped his hands together. "Who wants to die first?"

Nico

It seemed plausible that Will had actually broken his brain, Nico thought vaguely, as the seconds dragged on and he continued to gape at Will.

"You should probably close your mouth," Will said helpfully. "Dry mouth is no joke. It can lead to sores and tooth decay, and in extreme cases it can-"

"You're adopted?" Nico interrupted. Will nodded, looking perplexed. "But you never said anything!"

"Yeah well, you never asked," Will said defensively.

Nico felt like he'd just been slapped. "Oh. Well, I didn't want to pry, or bug you-"

"It's not prying," Will said quietly. "I prefer the term 'getting to know someone'. It doesn't matter. I'm long over it."

Nico was unconvinced. "But you never even mentioned it in passing."

Will shrugged uncomfortably. "Yeah well, I don't like to talk about it."

"But you never stop talking!" Nico exclaimed before he could think.

Will raised an eyebrow. "Wow, thanks."

Nico winced. "I just mean- I don't know. I can't believe I didn't know that... wait a second. I've seen your mom though! You have a picture of her and your little sister! You look like them. That doesn't make any sense."
"Well yeah," Will muttered. "That's my aunt. And my little sister's actually my cousin. My aunt adopted me as soon as she heard. I've called her my mom for as long as I can remember. She told me to. Same with my sister. My 'mom' had no idea that my real mom even had me for a while. They weren't close."

Nico didn't know what to say. Well no, he knew what he wanted to ask, but he wasn't sure how. He gave it a try. "Your mom- your birth mom, I mean… is she…?"

"Alive," Will assured him. He shrugged his shoulders a little. "She didn't want me."

"Oh," Nico said, somewhat hollowly. He stared at Will for a second. "Hm."

Will almost grinned. "Is there anything you want to ask, Death Boy?" he said teasingly.

Nico gave him the gentlest glare he was capable of. "Fine. Why didn't she want you?"

Will shrugged. "I don't know the specifics except for what I've pieced together from my mom and Apollo. I guess… well, you know how he is. I guess he didn't really tell her who he was until it was too late. And then when monster attacks started happening he popped back up and tried to explain it… she thought he was nuts and decided she wanted nothing to do with it anymore. I spent a few years in the foster system going from family to family until my aunt heard about it and showed up."

"Oh," Nico murmured.

Will sighed. "Yeah, well, I've gotten over it. The family I have now is amazing and I wouldn't change it for a second." He smiled at Nico.

Nico tried to smile back. "I'm glad."

"Me too. So… I guess I should go in?"

"If you want," said Nico.

"Well I certainly don't want to, but it's better than going back right?" Apparently Nico's silence was enough answer for Will. He turned his back to the house and faced Nico. "It's settled then, we'll just have to- to-" Will trailed off. He stared past Nico's shoulder, looking shocked. "Nico!"

Nico spun around to see what he was looking at… and found himself on the hilltop, overlooking camp half-blood. "What…?" he stammered. Before he had time to even fully register the change, their surrounding began morphing again. The air temperature fell drastically; the grass withered and became damp, then soggy beneath their feet. It crystallized as the air became freezing and frosted over.

The ground shuddered violently. "Will!" Nico yelled. With a crack, it seemed to split in half, sinking lower.

"Did you do that?" Will shouted over the wind.

"No!" Nico reached to his side for his sword and drew it- then was forced to fling himself sideways as the ground broke apart. He barely made it. He just managed to grab onto the edge of the freezing land before the ground gave way beneath his feet. Will, whom had lost his balance and fallen as well, crawled towards him. He reached out and grabbed Nico's hand, dragging him back up over the side.
They lay in the snow, gasping and shaking. "What- the hell- was that?" Nico panted.

He pushed himself up, and froze. They were in a winter landscape now, with tall pine trees and at least a foot of snow. More flurries fell from the sky. A huge cliff started about ten feet away from them. Beyond that, an ocean extended, roiling and churning violently.

"What is it?" asked Will. "Where are we?"

"We're…" Nico swallowed. "At my school. In Maine." He pointed through the trees. A ways off he could make out the distant twinkle of lights.

"This doesn't look like the forties," said Will.

"It's not. This is one of the first memories I have… afterwards. It's where I found out I was a demigod. It's where I met Annabeth, Thalia, Artemis and the hunters… and Percy." Nico hesitated. "I also met your dad here. He brought me to camp."

"Indeed I did," said a voice behind them.

Nico and Will spun. "Dad!" Will shouted. He ran forward and then stopped, looking at Apollo's figure uncertainly. "Wait, is it really you?"

Apollo looked darkly at him. "Of course it is. Who else would I be?"

"You left so fast before," Will exclaimed. "Are you okay? I-,"

"Why on earth would I be okay Will?" Apollo snarled in very un-Apollo-like way. Will flinched, looking shocked.

"Oh…" Will muttered weakly. "It was a stupid question, I guess. I'm going to rescue-"

"You can't," Apollo said through his teeth.

Will licked his lips nervously. "You said that before, but I know I will—"

"Fail."

Will looked at him blankly. "What?"

Apollo glared darkly at him. There was something in his gaze that Nico couldn't place, something hostile. "I said you will fail."

"I- what do you mean?" Will looked flabbergasted.

"I mean that if anyone else had come- any other of my children- there might have been a chance. But not you. You stand no chance of saving me. Of saving any of us. You have doomed us all."

"But-," Will whispered, eyes wide and hurt, "the prophecy was sent to me."

"By Python!" Apollo shouted, eyes flashing. "Because you are the weakest. You have no powers- you can do nothing. You are useless."

Will had gone white as a sheet after Apollo's words.

"Leave him alone," Nico growled at Apollo. He felt uncomfortable talking back to a god, especially one that was Will's dad, but he couldn't help it. Apollo was acting like a real jerk.
"Stay out of it, Nico di Angelo," Apollo snarled. He eyed Will up and down menacingly. "You," he spat, "are nothing close to a hero. You couldn't even keep my powers safe!"

Will looked like he was going to cry. Or throw up.

"Will," Nico shouted desperately over the gusting wind. "This isn't real! Remember, you didn't tell him about his powers! It's all just a trick. You can't believe it."

Apollo's glare switched furiously to Nico. "I said, stay out of it, son of Hades."

He swept his arm forward and Nico felt the air leave his chest as he was slammed backwards. He landed heavily in the snow, ten feet back, gasping as the wind was knocked out of him.

"Leave him alone," Will screamed at his dad, hands balling into fists. "How can you say that? I don't hide during battles! I stay in the infirmary to heal people!" Nico had never seen Will, or his dad, so enraged, especially not at each other.

"If that's what you want to call it," Apollo growled.

"Back off," Nico snarled at Apollo. He moved to point his sword at the God but before he could he found himself knocked backwards again. He landed with a loud "Oof!"

Apollo raised his hand, palm glowing, towards Nico-

Nico barely saw what happened next.

With a yell Will ran at Apollo. "Will don't!" Nico screamed at him. Will wasn't even armed, or thinking clearly. Before Nico could move to try to help there was a blinding flash of light. He flinched and was forced to cover his eyes until it passed. A second later it did, and Nico found himself still on the cliff in the snow, with wind and snowflakes gusting around him.

Except now he was very much alone.

"Will?!" Nico pushed himself up, screaming. "WILL!" There was no answer. His voice echoed over the trees and back to his own ears, terrified and alone. He spun in the snow, looking around desperately.

It was useless. There was no one else in sight.

He didn't know how long he stood there, screaming Will's name, but eventually his voice was hoarse. His eyes were prickling dangerously.

Movement in the distant tree-line caught his eye. Running forward he picked up his sword where it had fallen from his hand when he fell. Two ghosts, he realized, familiar ones. Bianca and-

Nico turned and ran, unwilling to see it. Unwilling to listen to what they had to say, or interact with them at all. This isn't happening, he thought, this isn't happening, this isn't-

He ran through the opposite trees, down the driveway, and straight for the school, any structure that seemed safer than what awaited behind him. For a paralyzing second he considered that the door might be locked, that he would be stuck with this new reality. It wasn't, thankfully.

He threw himself inside, slammed the door, bolted it, and then slide down against the wall. He sat there shaking violently.

He did not understand, could not understand how this had happened. It had come so fast, without
warning… he had barely had time to lift his sword. And this… this was not something he could accept. Will couldn't be gone.

And yet he was.

Nico's eyes burned savagely and before he could help it, he was crying. How did he always end up alone? How did he always manage to fail to protect the people he loved? How come it felt like all he did was try and try and yet still ended up on the bottom, left behind, forgotten?

Why him?

The question lingered in his brain. Were the Gods right, all those years ago? They had hunted him relentlessly, torn apart his house- nations, really – wanting to kill him. Because he was apparently too powerful. Was being a child of Hades really so bad? he wondered. Of course, it may have just been the pact of the Big Three, but he had only been eight. His head flooded with questions suddenly, ones he had finally began to move past over the previous years. Was there really something wrong with him?

Nico's mind felt crowded with dark thoughts all of a sudden, as he sat there in the shadow of his old school. A part of him felt these thoughts were absurd, completely irrational – this was all in the past- but another part couldn't be sure.

It was then that he noticed the door across from him.

It did not belong in the school; the old wood did not match the others along the hallway, and besides, he had already seen this door before. It was the same door he had seen in his old house, the one he had refused to enter.

Nico stood, heart hammering in his chest. Clovis had said to look for something unusual, hadn't he? Nico couldn't remember this door in his past. Couldn't that technically be considered unusual? He moved forward slowly, until he stood directly in front of it, staring at the handle. His heart pounded.

Anything was better than sitting here…

Almost without feeling, he opened it and descended down the stairs. He walked slowly, gripping the hilt of his sword. At the bottom he found… nothing.

He was in a pitch black room. He reached out a shaking hand, feeling for a light switch. He found it and flicked it on.

And nearly jumped out of his skin.

In the far corner sat a man, hunched over. His attire was entirely black, shimmering spectrally like smoke. His skin was the color of milk, his eyes dark galaxies that were trained on the newcomer. He did not move an inch as he stared at Nico.

Nico stumbled back, reeling. He gripped his sword tightly in his hand.

"Who are you?" he gasped, terrified from the shock of seeing him. There was a malevolence surrounding the man he had never felt before… well, only once.

The man's eyes glinted. "I think you know who I am," he said quietly. "We're old friends, you and I. Or don't you remember?"
Nico shook his head silently, pulse racing. He wanted to flee, to run back up the steps, slam the door shut, and never stop running until he was safely back at camp. But that wasn't an option.

"I know who I think you are," Nico finally managed to choke out. "But I also know it's not possible."

"I think you would be surprised by what is possible for someone as ancient as I am," said the man. "Go ahead," he said quietly. "Who do you think I am?"


"Guilty as charged," said Tartarus.

Nico stepped backwards, back hitting the cold wall behind him. A jolt went through his body.

"But-" Nico stammered. He was shaking violently, whether through fear or shock or both he didn't know. "That's not possible. You can't be here."

"Of course I am not really here," said the man. "I am locked away, far beneath the Underworld." Nico was still frozen in fear. When he did not answer the man continued. "You seem to have found yourself in quite the dilemma, child of Hades. Look at you, all alone, trapped in this Labyrinth."

It took Nico a second to find his voice. "I'm not trapped. I can still find a way out…"

"You might have," Tartarus agreed. "But unfortunately for you I have asked my dear friend Morpheus to seal off the exit for now. I am afraid there will be no leaving for you, son of Hades."

"That's not possible," Nico whispered. "You're-"

"Locked away, yes we've established that," said Tartarus. "However that does not mean I have not grown strong enough to have some influence outside of my prison. I have… certain allegiances."

Nico wondered if he was going to throw up.

Tartarus continued, "I have a proposition for you, Son of Hades. I will allow you to leave this place… if you agree to grant me one favor, when I ask."

Nico would have laughed, had he not been shaking so bad. "You want me to help you?" he asked, already shaking his head. "I'll never help you. I'd rather die."

Nico looked behind him at the door, back the way he had come. Almost as if he had read his mind, Tartarus rumbled, "Flee, if you like. I will not pursue you, you have my word. You would be safe out there. Nothing could harm you. No one will hurt you. You can stay in the Labyrinth for all of eternity, until everyone you know is lost and you fade away into nothing. No Elysium, no rebirth. Eventually it will be as though you were never born. But know this; if you stay, you will never know what might have been."

"I don't care," Nico said hollowly. "I won't betray my friends."

Tartarus sighed, a sound that shook the entire room. "Such a pity and a waste. If that is your decision then who am I to argue? It is a shame. I suppose I will have to use the other one instead, that son of Apollo."

"Will?" Nico's voice jumped an octave. "Stay away from Will."

"It is one or the other, Nico di Angelo. You or him. One of you will have to help me. I would
prefer it to be you. Do you not think we are alike? Am I really so bad? You met me before, and you survived. I think we could make quite a good team, wouldn't you agree?"

"No," Nico snarled. "I'll never help you!"

"So be it," said Tartarus. "It will be the other one then."

His form flickered like he was about to leave and Nico yelled, "Wait!"

Will's face flashed before Nico's eyes, messy blonde hair, halcyon blue eyes. Nico recalled how before they had left he had looked at Will and prayed that darkness would never be able to hurt him like it had Nico. The thought was unthinkable.

Tartarus turned and looked expectantly at him. "I am waiting…"

"Just one favor, right?" Nico asked, feeling his stomach twist.

"Just one favor," Tartarus promised. "When I ask."

"And you'll let me out of here? To my friends?"

Tartarus smiled. It was a twisted one, more of a leer. "And I'll get you out and back to your friends."

"And you won't go after Will?" Nico checked again, stalling.

Tartarus chuckled. "I am not trying to trick you, son of Hades. Yes, I will leave your precious son of Apollo alone. Of course, I cannot promise for any other Gods…"

Nico chewed his lip. He was stalling. He knew he would hate himself if he did this, but so what, right?

And it would help protect Will.

"I accept."

The next thing Nico knew, he was falling to his knees in lush, warm grass.

"Nico!" A warm hand touched his shoulder and he reacted. Grabbing the connecting arm, he twisted, kicked his leg out at the person's feet, and a second later was on top of them with a sword at their throat.

It was Will.

Nico stared at him, too shocked to register much.

"I was so worried. Are you okay?" Will asked in concern, despite being pinned to the ground with a sword at his throat.

Nico stared, floundering. No words seemed to be enough to express how he felt. Instead he flung himself forward and hugged Will.

It was, without a doubt, the most awkward hug he'd ever participated in, even rivaling the one Jason had given him before. He couldn't really get his arms around Will, what with him being on the ground, so instead he just sort of dug his hands under him as best he could. Then he half-collapsed on him, with a heavy thump. Will patted his back awkwardly.
It took Nico a minute to realize he was crying. At first he didn't really know why. Just relief at being free, he supposed.

Then he remembered.

He remembered the terrible thing he had done, the promise he had made. It felt like dream, a nightmare, like it hadn't quite been real. He could recall everything that had happened, but he just didn't quite believe it yet.

He felt sick, and ashamed, and disgusted with himself.

And he could never tell Will.

"Thank the Gods," Will muttered from under him. "I was just about to go back in after you!"

Nico pushed himself up immediately and stared at Will in disbelief.

"Uh, what's wrong?" Will asked.

Then Nico (extremely gently) slapped Will's cheek. "Go back in?" he almost yelled. "Are you crazy!?"

Will looked at him, shocked. He smirked. "You're welcome, Death Boy. Now, not that I don't enjoy this, but would you mind getting off me?"

Nico flushed but did as Will asked. "I'm glad you're okay," he muttered.

"Me too," said Will, sitting up. "I'm glad we got out!"

"No kidding." Nico allowed Will to pull him to his feet. He looked around to see that they were in a sort of canyon. Blood-red poppies filled the field. Behind them was a small cave, which Nico presumed was where they had just come from. He shuddered. A promising pathway wound up around the canyon.

"So I guess this means we're ready to go find Lou and Cecil? I'm gonna take a wild guess and say it's that way." Will pointed up the pathway.

"We need a plan first," Nico said quietly. "We can't just walk in, especially if they want to hand you over to Python."

"I've got an idea." Will turned to Nico eagerly and eyed him up and down, a smile already growing on his face.

Nico looked at him doubtfully. "Is it better than your last plan, in which you almost broiled yourself?"

"Yes!"

"I doubt that." Nico muttered. "Fine. Hit me."
"How are your acting skills?"

"Nonexistent," said Nico. "Which, I'm sure, are still loads better than yours."

Will pouted a little. "I'll have you know mine are great, thank you very much. I've been in theatre since I was five."

"Hopefully not musical," Nico said snidely, between breaths- the climb to the cave was proving more strenuous than either of them had anticipated. "I've heard your singing. It's not something to boast about."

Will sighed. "Whatever Death Boy. Just stick with the plan."

"We don't have a plan."

"I just told you it!"

"Your plan sucks."

"It's better than yours."

Nico frowned at him. "I didn't have a plan."

"Exactly. That's why mine's better."

"There'll be no acting involved," Nico said. "It's far better to just sneak in and get out fast."

"That may be true, but what if we get caught?" Will demanded. "We need a better plan."

"We won't get caught."

"Uh huh, sure. If we get caught-"

"Then we fight our way out."

Will looked pained. "You know I'm no good at fighting."

Nico shrugged. "Fine. You can hide behind me and I'll fight our way out."

Will looked displeased. "That's not good enough! I'm not going to be completely useless…"

Will continued speaking but Nico tuned him out, nodding vaguely at the appropriate moments. Even as they climbed the poppy-covered slope to their lair, he couldn't bring himself to care much about the Oneiroi.

Truth be told he couldn't get his mind past what he considered to be far darker matters. Namely
what had happened back in the basement of his old school.

What could Tartarus possibly want from him? What could Nico offer him that a primordial didn't already have in his own power? Nico didn't like to think about it. If Tartarus could so easily take over Nico's dreams in the Labyrinth, did that mean he could manipulate dreams anywhere, anytime now? It's because he's working with Morpheus, they let him do that, Nico thought desperately, trying to reassure himself as a feeling of panic crept in. It was easy for him in the Labyrinth because he had allies there. He can't just pop up any time now...

Nicoalready had enough nightmares, he didn't need the real Tartarus to start making appearances.

"Nico, are you even listening?!"

"What? Yeah," Nico said quickly. But why hadn't Tartarus just left him in there? He'd certainly threatened to, it would have been easy for him. Didn't he hate Nico for escaping him the first time? Why did he want him alive?

What in the name of Hades could he possibly want from Nico di Angelo?

"Really," said Will, looking severely annoyed. "Then what did I just say?"

"Uh..." Nico looked at the son of Apollo blankly. It doesn't matter what Tartarus asks for, said a tiny voice in his head. He promised to leave Will alone. Isn't that enough? "That you wish you weren't useless, but you acquiesce to hide behind me and keep your mouth shut?"

Will looked both furious and exasperated. "What's up with you? I know you have terrible social skills, but usually you at least pretend that you care. At least a little. Do you really hate the plan that much? 'Cause we can always think of something different if you-"

"No, it's fine," Nico interrupted. He looked away from Will. He'd just have to hope that the price of a favor for Tartarus wasn't too high. And if it was... Nico pushed he thought away. He'd find a way to deal with it, just like he always did.

A part of him knew he was kidding himself, but he shoved it down.

The one thing he did know was that Will could not find out. It would only upset him and Nico knew Will would hate the idea that Nico was trying to protect him.

Nico thought back to how Will had run at Apollo in anger. It was out of character for him. It may have just been the stress of the situation, or their quest in general, but one thing was for sure; Nico didn't like seeing him that way.

"I can't believe you talked to your dad like that," Nico said, coming out of his reverie. "I know it wasn't actually him, but still. What were you thinking when you ran at him? You can't have thought attacking him was a good idea."

Will looked uncomfortable. "I don't know what came over me. I guess I've been on edge since this started. And I didn't want him to hurt you..." Will flushed. When he spoke again his eyes were downcast. "Pretty stupid that that's what my mind comes up with to be afraid of, right? Being a disappointment to my father. Still, it worked out for the best. It got me out."

Will sounded like he was asking for affirmation. In broad daylight his eyes were clear and blue, an impressive replica of the sky above. Nico noticed that they had deep circles beneath them, like he hadn't slept well. Hardly surprising.
Nico had a sudden flashback to the time he had tricked Percy into coming into the Underworld only to bring him to Hades. He had done it desperately, trying to make his father happy.

It had not worked out well.

"It's not stupid at all," Nico muttered after a moment. A sudden thought occurred to him. He opened his mouth, but then closed it again.

Will noticed. "What?"

Nico shrugged nervously. "Unless it was some sort of test. Maybe the Oneiroi did it because they wanted to see how you'd react."

Will looked taken aback at first, then thoughtful. "Hmm. Well maybe they'll rethink their plans then. Speaking of which, what happened to you after I disappeared? How'd you get out?"

It took Nico a moment to swallow the lump that had lodged itself in his throat. "I, uh, ended up going into my school."

Will watched him closely. "And then?"

Nico shrugged uncomfortably, and chose to bluff his way through the answer. "Well, I mean, it's school. Doesn't get much worse than that…"

Will stared at him, brow furrowed. His gaze made Nico look away and fidget with the hilt of his sword. He could tell Will didn't quite believe him.

Just as Nico was about ready to get defensive, Will took a deep breath. "Good point."

They continued on in silence, Nico with guilt gnawing on his insides.

When they were about a hundred feet out from the entrance to the cave they skirted off the pathway, moving into the closure of the trees to lessen their chance of being discovered.

"I should just shadow travel in there, find Lou and Cecil, and then get the hell out," Nico muttered.

"No," Will said immediately. "Too much could go wrong. We don't even know where they are in there, or how big the place is. Plus I don't need you needlessly exhausting yourself." Will chewed his lip thoughtfully. "I do wish I had my bow- I know I'm not the best shot but it makes me feel better. I hate walking in there without anything at all."

Nico looked down at the stygian iron sword in his hand. "You have your sonic whistle right?"

"Sure. But I don't know how well it'll work against Gods." Will eyed the entrance to the cave, looking slightly green at the prospect of entering. "Are you ready?"

Nico nodded but just as he was about to step forward a figure appeared in the mouth of the cave.

Will quickly yanked him back behind a boulder. He narrowed his eyes, peering through the branches. "Is that… Agnete? What is she doing here?"

"She does work for them, remember," Nico muttered, annoyed that there was already a foil in their plan.

"Well yeah, but I thought she'd be taking care of her hotel or something, doing their dirty work. Not be, you know, here with them. Now what do we do?"
Nico thought for a moment. He would have suggested they simply wait for her to leave, but Agnete didn't appear to be going anywhere very soon. She paced slowly forward, moving closer to them, brow furrowed, a heavy expression on her face. He watched as she cast a nervous look over her shoulder.

"Nico?" Will whispered, his grip tightening painfully on Nico's arm.

"Shut up," Nico whispered. "Don't move."

He tried to still his breathing as she got closer and closer. Hopefully Lotus Eater's didn't have a sense of smell as keen as other monsters, or else he and Will would be in trouble. She didn't give any inclination that she was aware of their presence. Once more she looked over her shoulder, back the way she had come.

Then Nico drew his sword and stepped into the shadows and, reappearing behind her a second later, clapped a hand over her mouth. He threw his arm carrying his sword around her waist. Agnete gave a muffled yelped and tried to struggle away, but not before Nico managed to drag her back into the bushes.

Agnete struggled and Nico was forced to remove his hand from her mouth to avoid being bitten.

"Release me, demigod spawn!" she shrieked.

"Be quiet," Nico snapped. "And no one gets hurt," he added darkly a moment later.

"Nico, what the Hades!?!" Will exclaimed angrily. "This is not the plan!"

"Your plan sucks," Nico reiterated. "Where are you going?" he demanded to his still-struggling hostage.

Agnete scoffed and tried to stomp on his foot. "I do believe I'm being mugged when all I simply wanted was to go for a pleasant stroll."

"Sure," Nico snarled. He raised his sword slightly. "And where were you strolling to?"

"None of your beeswax."

Nico narrowed his eyes. "It looked to me like you were sneaking away."

"Then perhaps you should get your eyes checked," Agnete retorted. "Now release me. I don't want your Underworld stench rubbed all over my clothes."

Nico scowled and slowly released her, but he kept his sword leveled at her. "Don't try to run," he advised. "I think we both know I can move faster than you."

Agnete looked annoyed at the statement, but only moved a pace away, turning around to face her kidnapper. She huffed and straightened her flawlessly ironed jacket.

"Where were you sneaking off to?" Nico asked at the same time Will asked "Where are our friends?"

Agnete stopped struggling all at once. "Hmm. Probably dead by now."

Will stepped forward looking pale. "No. That's not true, you're lying."

Agnete shrugged her shoulders. "Believe what you want. It does not matter. You have no chance of
defeating Morpheus and his brothers. They are too powerful. And the entrance is trapped. You'll never make it in if you don't know what you're doing. They'll find you before you make it ten feet past the doorway."

A spur-of-the-moment idea came to Nico. He smiled at her coldly. "Good thing you're going to help us then, right?"

Agnete looked in incredulous. "I'll do no such thing."

Nico narrowed his eyes. "Then you can die instead," he said, as menacingly as he was capable.

"Nico..." Will began nervously.

Agnete raised her chin. "Your threat doesn't scare me, son of Hades. I'd rather die than face Morpheus's wrath if he finds out I helped you."

Nico shrugged, and lowered his sword. "Fine. I guess we'll just have to walk in and hope for the best."

Agnete looked at him in disbelief. "That's the most idiotic thing I've ever heard anyone say. You'll be caught immediately. And then interrogated, and tortured, and... actually, I'll admit that does sound entertaining."

"That's probably true," Nico said. "And during our interrogation we can tell them all about how you were suspiciously sneaking away to go do God's-know-what."

Nico was taking a shot in the dark, but he seemed to have struck his mark.

Agnete face paled slightly. "You'll do no such thing," she snarled. "They'll-" She stopped, looking frightened. Whatever she was thinking made her wince visibly. "You can't do that," she repeated, sounding strained.

"Well I don't want to, of course," Nico said craftily, "but like you said, they'll probably torture it out of us."

"Unless you, you know, help us get in there," Will said, catching on. "No harm no foul."

Overall, Nico was pretty pleased with this spontaneous plan, especially now that they were about to have leverage on their side.

Agnete looked like she'd sucked on a lemon. She was silent for a moment. "Drat," she muttered. "Fine. I'll get you inside. But I just want you to know, I'd never betray my boss if it were only my life at stake."

Nico looked at her in confusion. He seriously doubted she cared if something happened to him, Will, Lou, or Cecil. What was she getting at?

Will understood before Nico did. "Who else are you trying to protect, then?" he asked, curiously. "I know it's not us, and it's clearly not the Oneiroi if you're willing to betray them like you just agreed to."

Agnete glared at him. "It is none of your business, Sweetie. Now come along, and stay close if you want to survive. I'd like to get this over with."

Carefully, she stepped back out of the trees and onto the path. Nico and Will followed. It felt weird
to be walking along in broad daylight but he didn't think Agnete would betray them now. After threatening to spill the beans on her sneaking around he had a feeling she also wasn't in favor of them getting captured.

"Wow," Will muttered as they walked. "So you're, like, a triple agent, then? No wait, quadruple, if you count us." He shook his head. "First Zeus, then Morpheus, then… someone, and now us. I have a headache just thinking about it."

"Then don't think about it," Agnete suggested. She turned and looked a Will. "I wasn't kidding you know. They do intend to take you prisoner. You're playing right into their plans right now. Are you sure it wouldn't be best to just leave your friends behind. If they're even still alive."

"They're still alive," Will said forcefully, though it sounded strained. "They have to be."

"Don't worry, Will," Nico told him. "They're smart and good fighters. They can take care of themselves." He tried his best to sound comforting, but he wasn't sure he pulled it off as well as he would have liked. Comforting wasn't his specialty.

"How touching," Agnete snapped. "Now let's get a move on, I don't have all day."

"What, are we interrupting a meeting with your other allegiance?" Nico muttered.

"In a way, yes. But that's not the point. To minimize the chances of your inevitable capture I'd like to get this done as quickly as possible."

"'Our capture,'" Nico quoted. "And I suppose once he captures us he plans on handing Will over to Python…"

Agnete was silent for a moment. "So you're not completely stupid. I see you've figured it out. Yes, Python has requested this one be brought before him." She motioned to Will. "He wishes for him to be present at his father's execution."

Will's breath caught and he tripped over a rock. Nico couldn't blame him- they'd suspected what Python's plans were for days now, but hearing it outright as they just had sounded awfully fatalistic.

"And then?" Nico asked.

"And then what?" asked Agnete.

Nico hesitated and then went on recklessly. "And then he's… what? Going to try to release Tartarus? We know he's been torturing Apollo for information about it these past few weeks…"

He said it as confidently as he could, knowing it was still mostly guesswork. He'd hoped to startle Agnete into admitting more about Python's plans, but he was disappointed. In fact she didn't react at all but continued on silently.

Next to him Will looked pale and upset. And honestly Nico couldn't blame him. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to have your whole family depending on you like Will's was. At least that's one plus to not having any family, Nico thought.

They'd reached the entrance to the cave.

On the right side of the stone opening a wood post had been smashed into the ground with a skull and crossbones nailed to the front. It read Solicitors will be eaten. Except Girl Scouts with cookies.
Will glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. Nico shrugged. Secretly, he kind of liked the sign.

He’d been thinking of putting something similar in front of the Hades cabin before he left.

"You must keep quiet, step exactly where I step, and don’t move, blink, or breathe unless I tell you to," Agnete murmured darkly.

"Seriously?" said Will.

Nico yawned, feeling sleepy.

"Don’t let yourself get tired," Agnete advised quietly. "It’s a natural side effect around them. You mustn’t let it get to you, or else you may never wake up." She stepped to the side of the path and motioned towards a patch of blood-red poppies. "Take one," she ordered. "Both of you. They’ll help protect you from the effects."

Will bent and picked a couple while Nico groaned. "Ugh, not flowers again," he moaned, but took it from Will.

"It won’t kill you," said Will.

"That’s debatable."

"Yes, it is, Sweetie," Agnete said coolly. "Now, whatever happens, no matter how tired you feel you cannot go to sleep or pass out— or else you are doomed. It will pass once we get in farther but the first few minutes will be difficult."

Stepping inside the cave was ominous, the darkness creeping around them like a cold blanket. Normally Nico found a sense of safety in the shadows but these ones felt hostile, like they might smother him, pulling him down into the blackness forever. Immediately he felt a wave of exhaustion overcome him. His eyes began to drift shut and nearly fell sideways. Remembering what Agnete had said, he clutched the flower tightly. As a son of Hades, he was slightly more accustomed to this type of sleep-inducing-magic, as he could do it himself, but beside him Will looked like he was ready to collapse.

Nico pinched Will’s arm hard.

"Ow," Will murmured, frowning at Nico. "What was that for?"

Pushing his own sleepiness aside, Nico blinked hard and looked around. It looked like a typical cave, though a large one at that. Three tunnels extended from where they stood, each of them dark and deep looking. A feeling of death crept over Nico when he looked at the one furthest to the left. Of course Agnete chose that one.

As they walked (more like stumbled) down the tunnel Nico soon discovered why he was feeling a sense of death. A few skeletons, some half-disintegrated with age, lay strewn about the pathway.

Agnete sighed as she looked at them. "And here lie the fools who thought they could enter unprepared." She gave Nico something akin to a leer. "Not so sad about holding a flower now, are you dearie?"

Nico gave her a scowl, the effects of which were ruined by a large yawn. Agnete grinned maliciously at him, her pearly-white teeth flashing in the dark.
They continued onward. Agnete made multiple turns right and left, and although Nico tried to keep track eventually he was found himself completely lost, and hoped that there was an easier way out. Focusing, he tried to gather the shadows around him, seeing if they would obey him enough to allow him to shadow travel. He felt nothing, no response. Nico gulped - there would be no shadow traveling out of here.

Just to be sure, he tried again. Concentrating, he tried to ignore the hostile feeling he received from the shadows, trying to gain control over them… he felt nothing, though it was then that he heard something coming from within the shadows.

It sounded like a whisper, and for a second he though he felt the ghost of hot breath on the back of his neck. Nico jumped and spun around, hand going to the sword at his waist. There was nothing there - at least, nothing he could see.

"Nico? What's wrong?" Nico could hear the alarm in his voice.

"It's fine, it's just… these shadows, they- they don't feel right. I don't like it."

Will didn't answer.

They continued walking, but after another minute Nico couldn't resist. Carefully he reached back into the shadows, searching for the voice again. He searched around but this time found nothing. Feeling frustrated he began to pull back-

There. He'd heard something. Half excited, half terrified-out-of-his-wits he listened, making out vague words. "Stay… me… here…stay…here…"  

Stay here with me.

The idea sounded pleasant. In fact, the longer he thought about it, the more wonderful these shadows seemed. They seemed to envelope him like a cozy cushion. Perhaps he could just rest here for a while…

A different voice rasped through his mind, suddenly, harsh and grating like sandpaper. For a fraction of a second he was standing in the fields of asphodel, alight with fire around him. Smoldering ash hit his arms and face, burning the skin. 'Now is not your time, Son of Hades. I still have one thing to ask of you…'

Nico gasped, flinching. His heart hammered in his chest. He scratched at his arm, trying to remove the feeling of hot ash on his skin.

A hand grabbed his wrist.

"Nico," Will whispered loudly. "What's wrong with you?"

Nico looked around trying to figure out where he was. Oh, right. In a cave with Will and the dodo bird lady…

"I-" Nico took a deep breath. "I'm fine. Let's just get out of here. Fast."

They continued onward. After several more turns, they rounded a bend and-

"Cecil!"

Will's gasp startled Nico.
Nico watched as Will ran forward towards two figures who sat at the opposite side of the room. Nico recognized Cecil and Lou Ellen.

Lou Ellen and Cecil immediately shook their heads – Nico saw they both seemed to have been bound – as if they couldn't open their mouths. Will, being who he was, ran straight for his friends, trying to help them.

"Will, wait!" Nico shouted, running past Agnete who had stopped dead.

Will had already begun undoing Lou Ellen's hands when she motioned desperately, eyes wide, over Will's shoulder. Will froze. With a cold feeling in his stomach, Nico turned around and saw them.

The one in the middle he recognized- Morpheus. He had seen him at the battle over Manhattan years ago. His eyes glittered in the dark, reminding Nico oddly of starlight. The other two Nico had never seen before.

"Welcome, son of Apollo. I am glad to see you have finally made it. We have been expecting you for quite some time now," Morpheus said, his voice sounding like finely crushed glass.

Will gulped, frozen in horror.

Nico scowled and stepped forward, trying to look braver than he felt. "Let us go, Morpheus. My father's not going to be happy with what you're up to. Do you really want him on your bad side? Or any of the Gods for that matter?"

One of the Oneiroi, the one to Morpheus's left, who had a fierce, wolfish looking face and growling voice spoke, "Hades does not scare us, Nico di Angelo. Not, when there are much worse foes to be frightened of. We know how to pick our enemies."

Nico felt a sense of dread as he spoke. A part of him want to drop his sword and flee under his gaze, though he knew it would do no good. Swallowing his fear he asked, "Tartarus, you mean?"

The god smiled, revealing sharp canines. "Frightening though he may be," he said, "Tartarus will be our savior, not our foe." The god cocked his head to the side. "But I know just how terrifying you find him, son of Hades..." His eyes met Nico's with a dangerous gleam. "But you do remember me, do you not? You and I are old friends."

It took Nico a second to understand. He swallowed thickly. "Phobetor. Of course I know you."

Now he understood the terrible sense of dread he felt at seeing him, even more so than Morpheus. Phobetor was a god of dreams, but more specifically, nightmares.


"Leave him alone," Will snarled. "I know it's me you want. Let my friends go and I'll-," he took a deep breath. "I'll stay."

A brief, stunned silence followed his words.

"What?" Nico gasped. "Don't be ridiculous Will."

The other god- Phantasos- Nico assumed, spoke. "If only we could let all of your friends go, son of Apollo. But alas Python has asked us to dispose of anyone else with you."
"Any last words, Children?" Morpheus snapped his fingers, and suddenly it appeared that Lou Ellen and Cecil were able to speak again. Lou Ellen called Morpheus something rather rude in Greek.

"I understand how you feel, little girl," Morpheus said, surprisingly not-offended. "Get it out while you can, you don't have much longer to talk."

Lou Ellen glared at him but all she muttered after that was, "I'm not a little girl."

"Indeed you are not. You are a child of Hecate, and far too risky to keep alive." Morpheus motioned to Nico and Will. "Take their weapons," he ordered to his brothers.

Nico reached down to grasp his sword, only to discover it was already gone. Looking up he saw Morpheus twirling it in his hands. Nico ground his teeth in anger.

"Make sure they are all completely unarmed. Our host will be displeased if I bring him his meal still kicking." Morpheus continued, watching them critically as Phantasos began patting down Will. Nico scowled deeply as the same was done to him by Phobetor.

"Hey!" Will exclaimed. "Meal? Wait, he wants to eat us?"


Will scowled deeply. "Over my dead body."

Morpheus shrugged. "You don't need to worry about us hurting you. Python likes his meals still kicking anyways."

"Ew," muttered Lou Ellen.

"Er, My Lord," Agnete spoke up suddenly. Nico had almost forgotten she was still there. "Would it not be more prudent to keep them alive? Just in case, I mean…"

Morpheus gaze became chilly. "Be quiet. I have heard enough from you Agnete. You did well, bringing these two inside, but you are walking on thin ice. One misstep, and our deal is off."

Agnete looked upset. "My Lord, I have only done as you asked and-"

"And yet you continually jeopardize our plans. I daresay Python will be displeased with you as well, when he learns of your mistakes. Be grateful I am so lenient," Morpheus snarled at her.

Will scowled. "Unbelievable," he said. He looked to Nico "I knew she'd betray us." Then to Morpheus he added, "You know she was sneaking out to-""

"To bring you inside." Agnete spoke over him quickly.

Nico glared at her. "No. You were definitely sneaking off somewhere."

Agnete smiled at him. "Well now, I had to make it look convincing, didn't I, Sweetie?"

Nico ground his teeth together in anger. But there was something about the way she had interrupted him so swiftly… he was sure she was lying. She had been sneaking off somewhere that she didn't want the Oneiroi to know of.

Meanwhile Morpheus was turning Nico's sword in his hands. "Strange sword…" he muttered.
"Stygian Iron." He looked up quickly. "Where did you get this?"

Nico responded slowly, not at all happy with how their rescue mission was unfolding. "It's a long story," he said eventually. "And honestly it's none of your business."

Morpheus's eyes flashed. He flicked the point up to Nico's throat. "I would advise you not to be so rude. After all, Python never said you have to be in one piece- just that you were still wriggling."

Nico gulped. As much as he wanted to rage at Morpheus and tell him what an annoying prick he was, the thought of being turned into living sushi didn't sit well with him. He also didn't enjoy having his own sword pointed at him.

Pushing the feeling back, he shrugged. "I got it from the Underworld. My father asked me to recover it on a mission. I pulled it from some rocks along the cliffs; my father said only I could."

There was a brief silence after his words. "Get out," Cecil said suddenly. "So your sword is... Excalibur? Like from Arthurian legend?"

While Cecil looked like he was joking, Nico answered, entirely serious, "I don't know so much if it's from Arthurian legend, but I suppose all myths come from somewhere. And some of them cross over."

Will gaped at him. "Wait, your sword really is Excalibur?"

Nico smirked at him, although nothing was particularly amusing about their current situation. "I told you I'm the Ghost King."

Morpheus finally lowered the sword away from Nico. "Excellent. This will make a wonderful gift for Python."

Nico's eyes widened. "What?! No way, you can't just give my sword away. It's mine."

"Not anymore," said Phobetor. "Soon it will be yet another trophy for Python to display. When news spreads that he ate the one and only child of Hades, he will gain even more favor. You have gained many enemies Nico di Angelo, and they would be glad to see you dead."

Morpheus stepped forward, placing a hand on his brother's shoulder. "That is enough talk for now. It is nearly nightfall- the sun is fading. If we do not move soon we will not get the chance until tomorrow, and you know how he feels about lateness."

Morpheus grabbed ahold of Will, Phobetor taking Nico, while Phantasos grasped each an arm of Lou Ellen and Cecil. Together they were ushered forcefully down the hallway. Agnete did not follow them, and when Nico looked back at her she was staring after them, face partially concealed in the shadows, with a deep frown on her face.

Will

They walked for what felt like forever, past twists and turns. Morpheus dragged him along, though he was being nicer than his two brothers. At one point Cecil tripped and Will saw Phantasos shove him forward harshly.

"Don't!" Lou Ellen said angrily.

Phantasos scowled. "Brother, when can we kill these two? I am getting sick of holding onto them! Besides, they look like they would be delicious, perhaps fried up, or in a soup, or-"
"You're a monster," Will snarled at him.

Panic gripped him. How could they escape this? He couldn't just stand by and watch two of his best friends be killed, or eaten, or whatever they planned to do to them. He took a deep breath, feeling sick. Not for the first time he wished he had more powers than simply healing. He couldn't fight, Lou Ellen and Cecil still had their hands bound... right now Nico was their best chance in a fight, but Will knew it was ridiculous to think he could defeat three gods, in their home-territory.

He thought of the bow on Morpheus' back. If I could only get to it…

"Soon, Phantasos," Morpheus answered. "We are almost there."

Will wondered vaguely how he could tell. To him everywhere he looked was utter darkness, sinister, cold, and hiding all kinds of secrets. Still, the Oneiroi were the gods of sleep and dreams- he supposed it made sense that they liked the dark.

None of that solved their biggest problem now though.

I could pray, Will thought. But to whom? Apollo would be his first choice, but that would do no good.

Will felt his eyes prickle and silently cursed himself for being the most useless son of Apollo ever. Everyone had been right, perhaps Austin, or Kayla, or Marisol, or anyone should have led this quest instead of him…

You are not as weak as you believe yourself to be, a gentle voice whispered in his ear.

A shiver traced its way down Will's spine.

Will's eyes widened and he shivered. He had the sense the voice was distinctly feminine, yet he could not place who it was.

I heard about Hermes' little stunt he pulled behind Zeus's back. For days now I have searched for Apollo's power. I do believe I have finally found it.

Where? What do you mean? Who are you? Will thought.

He turned to try to look at his bow, trying to judge if he could grab it from Morpheus. For a brief moment he met Nico's eyes, dark and narrowed, and felt some flicker of understanding pass between them before Morpheus shoved him back around.

Your father will help you, but you must focus.

He can't help me, Will thought desperately, he's imprisoned, he has no power!

Have a little faith Will. Focus now. Call upon his power yourself.

Will was completely confused. Whoever this god or goddess was that was speaking to him must have been confused as well because Will knew that Apollo could not help them.

"We're here," Morpheus announced.

"Finally, can we kill them now?" Phantasos growled.

Fear ripped through Will. He needed to act now but he didn't know where to start-
Morpheus sighed at his brothers words. "Fine, but just don't-"

It was Nico who proved to be the catalyst of Will's bravery.

With exceptional speed he managed to push himself far enough away from his captor in order to spin around, taking hold of Phobetor's arm in the process, and kick him in the chest. To Will it looked a lot like kicking a stone wall, but it gave Nico the chance to break free.

At his brother's shout, Morpheus turned. With an adeptness that surprised even himself, Will snatched his bow and quiver from the god's shoulder, and moved back. Morpheus spun furiously, a long, wicked sword appearing from thin air in his hand.

Armed with nothing but his bow, Will barely managed to evade the blow, stumbling backwards.

"Hey!" Nico shouted, in a clear attempt to draw the attention away from Will. As he ducked under one of Morpheus' blows, Will drew back his bow aiming at Phantasos.

In the nick of time Phantasos moved out of the way of the shot, releasing Lou Ellen and Cecil in the process. The arrow clattered to the floor on the far side of the cave. Will ran to Lou Ellen and Cecil, and began working at the ropes around their hands.

"Will watch out!" Cecil yelped, eyes widening as he looked past Will's shoulder. Will looked around in time to have Nico crash into him. They crashed into a heap on the floor, before scurrying back up. Nico clutched his side, looking winded. The four demigods stood together, facing the three brothers. Phobetor was just picking himself up off the floor, snarling.

Will loosed another arrow. By some miracle, this time it found its mark, though it only just grazed Phantasos's side. He howled anyways, probably more out of anger than pain.

Beside Nico, a soft purple glow lit the cavern. Lou Ellen had summoned one of her fireballs, and she balanced it carefully in the palm of her hand.

"Fire." Will paused. He had been told to try using his powers by the mysterious goddess. He recalled the way his body had burned back in the clearing when he tried to harness the power of Apollo. And look how well that went, he thought, I destroyed it…

"Drop the bow, son of Apollo," Morpheus ordered. "And I'll be so kind as to make your friend's deaths painless. "If not..." his eyes like black sleet flicked over to Will's right. Will heard Nico gasped and saw him fall to his knees. Will nearly dropped his bow but managed to stop himself.

"What are you doing?" he yelled. "Leave him alone!"

Phobetor scowled. "It is not such a good idea to antagonize the gods of dreams when your friend has as many nightmares as he does."

Will ground his teeth together. He wanted to throw his bow to the side and run to Nico's side, but he was the only one armed right now. He did make a mental note to hug Cecil later, when he saw the son of Hermes kneel beside Nico and try talking to him.

"Will, what do we do?" Lou Ellen whispered beside him, eyes wide.

There was only one thing he could think of- and it would more than likely end disastrously. Taking a shaky breath, he focused, trying to remember what he had done before. He tied to imagine
gathering all the heat around him and within him, and magnifying it. For a moment nothing happened and he thought he had failed. Then searing warmth seemed to fill him.

It didn't hurt like it had last time, but he did feel frighteningly hot. For a wild moment Will wondered if it was possible that his clothes could get burned off. Oddly, he found that thought more disturbing then fighting off three angry gods.

He could not see any of his friends, the light was too bright, all-consuming. If they made sound that was blocked out as well.

It was then that Will came to the realization that he had collected all of this power and now had no idea what he should do with it.

He was growing hotter, his skin felt like it was beginning to blister. Any moment now Will feared he would lose control and end up exploding the entire cavern. Or valley.

The heat scorched his skin, it was becoming agony…

He was being burned alive.

But that wasn't possible, children of Apollo couldn't be burned…

He couldn't hold it back any longer for fear of disintegrating.

With a shout he threw his hand forward, feeling all the heat sucked away from him. He wasn't entirely sure what happened after that, because all his strength left him and he fell to his knees. Cool, soft hands grabbed his shoulders. Will recognized them vaguely as Lou Ellen's.

"Damn," Lou Ellen croaked. "That was way more powerful than my fireball…"

"Will, what in Hades was that?" demanded Cecil, staggering to his feet. He pulled Nico up with him, who looked equally pale and stunned.

"I- dunno," Will rasped out. His throat was parched, like he had swallowed hot sandpaper. Looking down he saw that his arms were in fact red and blistered. "Oh," he muttered weakly. "Ow."

"Will-" Nico said quietly. Looking up Will saw the son of Hades looking at him, dark eyes thoughtful and surprisingly concerned.

"I- I don't know what happened," Will muttered, feeling dizzy. "Wait!" He looked up quickly, feeling a lurch of fear in his chest. It subsided quickly. "Where- where did Morpheus and whatev- their-names go? What happened?"

"Er- I think you scared them off. Or blew them away. Or something. It was hard to tell, to be honest. I had to shut my eyes, you were glowing so bright," Cecil answered.

"Oh."

"Will, that was amazing," said Lou Ellen. "I didn't know you could do that-,"

"We need to get out of here, now," Nico interrupted. "Who knows how soon they'll be back. And then-" Nico's eyed Will, with a closed off expression that Will didn't like. The son of Hades sighed. "Then we need to talk. I think I might know what- I mean, it seems impossible, but- I'm not sure…"

"Not sure about what?" Will demanded weakly.
Nico hesitated. "I think I might know what happened but… it's a conversation that can wait. We need to get out of here. Fast."

"Okay. What's the plan?" asked Cecil.

"My plan." Nico muttered evasively in response. He bent down to pick up his sword from where he'd dropped it when he fell.

Lou Ellen turned to Nico. "Okay. What's your plan, Nico?"

"No plan." Nico told her.

She cocked her head to the side. "Huh?"

"I didn't have a plan," Nico muttered.

When Lou Ellen and Cecil continued looking confused, Will added groggily "Nico's plan was; 'Let's have no plan'."

He was met with blank stares. "We're improvising," Nico translated.

Cecil nodded. "Ah. My favorite plan."

"And yet I have a better one," a fifth, feminine voice added. For a horrifying moment Will thought the Oneiroi had already returned, but then he remembered that none of the Oneiroi were women. Will looked around to see Agnete emerging from one of the tunnels.

"Yeah right," Nico snarled. "You tried to sell us out. You betrayed us… not that there was much trust to betray even to begin with."

The blonde woman glared at him. "You complain too much son of Hades. Without me you couldn't have made it in at all."

Lou Ellen snorted.

Agnete ignored her, pointing down one of the more narrow passageways "There. That way leads to an exit along the cliffs. Stay to the left, don't stop. You can escape that way."

They all gaped at her.

"You're helping us? Why?" demanded Will.

"Along the cliffs?" gasped Cecil at the same time, clutching his side. "What, are we supposed to jump off? Because that's a terrible plan."

Agnete ignored them both, instead talking directly to Nico. "To the northeast there is an island. It is shrouded in the mist so you must take care not to miss it. Tell them I sent you. You will be among my people. You will understand more once you get there."

Though puzzled, Nico nodded. "Why are you helping us?" he demanded.

Agnete shook her head in warning. "Patience, son of Hades. Like I said, you will understand soon."

She turned to Will, grabbing his arm. Will visibly tensed as she moved close to him, but didn't pull his arm away. "Goodbye, son of Apollo. For the record, I-" Agnete hesitated. "I don't approve of what Python is doing to Apollo. I hope you can help your father before it is too late. If another war
After her parting words, Agnete fled back through the tunnel. The four demigods took the pathway she had indicated, sprinting along at a reckless speed in the dark. They seemed to be going the right way for the darkness was slowly lifting, washing the cave in ever-growing cool light. At last they reached the end and were blasted in the brightness from the outdoors, as well as pounding winds and the rush and roar of an ocean a hundred feet below, crashing against the rocks.

"What do we do now?" Will shouted over the wind.

Wordlessly Nico held out his hands. Lou Ellen grabbed one immediately, Will following the gesture more slowly. For once he didn't argue though, which Nico was thankful for.

Nico smirked at him. "What? No complaints?"

Will scowled, probably annoyed with himself that he couldn't think of an alternative solution. Nico's smirk deepened.

"Shut up," Will told.

"I didn't say anything."

"But I'm getting good at knowing what you're thinking."

Nico lost his smile at the words. Will knowing what he was thinking… that was a disturbing thought. He checked quickly to make sure that Cecil was safely holding Lou Ellen's hand and then, facing to the Northeast, stepped back into the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, why does everything end up being so much longer than I intend?! Seriously, this chapter was supposed to be like 3000 words. Instead it's over twice as long…

Anyway, I just couldn't resist with the part about Nico's sword- Percy's got a cool sword, Jason's got a cool sword, everyone's got an interesting weapon… Nico deserves something exciting too- even if it is technically not from Greek mythology :)

On another note, if you haven't already read the Trials of Apollo, do so NOW! :) Meg is great, Apollo's great, Solangelo's great! (When I first read the released chapter and I heard the name Meg I imagined the vivacious vixen from Disney's Hercules. It was glorious to discover she's actually chubby, has short hair, and rhinestone glasses! And has a weird little demon-baby-peach-thingy)

Please comment/review- it encourages me to write faster! :)
Lotus Eaters Eat Lotus Flowers

Chapter Thirteen:

Lotus Eaters Eat Lotus Flowers

On second thought, Nico should have known better than to try to shadow travel across an ocean to a mysterious island shrouded in mist, especially with his shadow traveling aim as atrocious as it was.

They landed in the ocean.

Dazed and stunned by the sudden submersion into cold water, Nico floundered around for a moment at the surface- right in time to be pushed under by an enormous wave. Panic washed over Nico. He'd never been very good at swimming, he'd never had much of a chance to practice. Of course, he could swim, he just wasn't very good at it, especially in a dark, deep, churning ocean of scariness.

Perhaps Poseidon wants to kill me after my confession about having a crush on Percy.

His lungs were running out of air. Stupidly, he tried to inhale, perhaps to yell at Poseidon for being so judgmental. He kicked his legs wildly as he began choking, desperately trying and failing to reach the surface-

Warm arms grabbed him by the back of his jacket and hauled him upwards. Nico broke the surface, spluttering and gazed up to see Will standing over him. For a wild second he thought that Will must be Jesus, walking on water and all that, when he realized that Will was simply standing in the water. On the ground.

About five feet behind him, Lou Ellen and Cecil were standing on the sandy bank, gawking at Nico like he had grown gills and a flipper.

Will released him carefully, letting Nico regain his feet. The water only went up to Nico's waist, much to his embarrassment.

Will pressed his lips together looking like he was trying exceptionally hard not to laugh.

"What?" Nico snapped, feeling like a drowned cat.

Will shrugged. "Oh, nothing. We just watched you flounder around in, like, three feet of water for a minute. It was pretty hilarious to watch. Then Cecil suggested you might be having a seizure or something so I got worried and came over. So, I uh, guess your swimming skills aren't so great then?"

Nico ground his teeth and stomped past Will, his soaked shoes squelching obnoxiously with each step.

Lou Ellen and Cecil had the good sense to remain silent. Nico glared at them too, daring them to say something. That made Lou Ellen grin, hazel eyes twinkling in amusement. "Maybe you should give him some swimming lessons Will," she called behind Nico. He watched as her smile faded a little. "You feeling alright Will?" Her words brought Nico up short and he turned to follow her gaze.
Will still stood in the water, grin fading, looking dazed and disoriented. Nico's gaze stretched down to his arms, which were red like. Nico's first thought was that he had some sort of bad rash, but he dismissed it quickly.

"Will is that-," Cecil faltered. "Are you… burnt?"

That made even less sense than a rash. Even if Will were able to get burned, they had spent the past few days in the Underworld and navigating dark caves. Nico was certainly no expert on the workings of the sun but he had a feeling people didn't normally get that sunburned in only the hour or so that it had taken him and Will to climb up to Morpheus's cave. He looked down at his own arms. Yep, as white as usual.

Will took a deep breath, examining his arms. "Er no," he muttered. "That's not possible. I-I don't… I'm fine." He supported his words with a pained wince.

"Like hell you are," Cecil said immediately. "What happened back there?"

"Really, I'm fine," Will complained. He squinted slightly and raised his hand like something bothered him. "It's just kind of hot."

Nico frowned. Looking around he took notice of their surroundings for the first time. They were on a shore, white sandy beaches extending on either side. Several palm trees sprouted from the grains, their fan-blades casting a minimal amount of shade. About thirty yards in from the water's edge a thick jungle of tropical looking trees and plants began.

Will was right, it was hot, and humid too, but there was a gentle breeze that felt pleasant on Nico's skin. Definitely not hot enough that it should have bothered a sun of Apollo though.

"Come on, Blondie," Nico muttered, walking towards Will. He made to grab Will's arm so he could drag him up to the shade of the trees, but he remembered the burns just in time. He made due grabbing the fabric of the sleeve of his shirt instead and tugging at it until Will took the hint and followed him slowly out of the water. Now that he was closer to him and paying attention, Nico was able to get a better look at Will. Dark circles lined his eyes, his expression dull and tired. Now that the adrenaline was wearing down he seemed to sway on his feet as he walked.

"You look terrible," remarked Cecil, which pretty much echoed Nico's thoughts. "You should sit down."

"Thanks for noticing," Will muttered, but it took little urging for him to do as suggested, carefully sitting against the trunk of the nearest palm. Nico, Cecil, and Lou Ellen sat down next to him in the warm sand. Cecil removed his wet jacket and placed it beside him. They kicked off their soaked shoes next. Lou Ellen leaned back with a sigh, laying on her back in the sand. After a moment she asked, "So does anyone know where we are? Or what happened back there?" She lifted her head squinting towards Will. "You know you totally saved us Will."

"Yeah, you did," agreed Cecil. "I know you're great at healing but I thought… well, I had no idea you could do that."

Will remained silent for a moment, eyes downcast. "Neither did I." He shifted uncomfortably. "I've never been able to do anything but healing. I have no idea what that was. I just-," Will swallowed. "I was just scared you guys were going to get hurt. Or eaten. Do you know where we are Nico?"

Nico shrugged. "Not really. I aimed in the direction Agnete told us to so I suppose this is the island she was talking about. Although where that is, I'm not sure."
"Why would she want us to come here?" Cecil asked.

"Cause she's crazy?" Lou Ellen said, shaking her head. "You know, I can't believe she actually kinda-sorta helped us escape."

"None of that matters right now," Nico said quickly. "Will what's wrong with your arms? Does it hurt?"

"Not really…" Will was the worst liar Nico had ever heard. Will met his gaze and took a deep breath. "Maybe a little."

"I wish we had our bags," said Cecil. "I had some ambrosia. It could've helped."

Will shook his head. "I don't know about that. I don't think I'd want to risk eating that stuff when it's this hot already," he said lightly.

"Will it's not that hot out," said Lou Ellen, eyes narrowing. "I think it feels perfect actually."

Cecil nodded. "Yeah. How did your arms get so sunburned anyways? Did you do that to yourself?"

"No way," Will said. "I've never heard of any child of Apollo being strong enough to burn themselves from their own power. Our power gives us protection too."

"But you just said you've never done that before-," Lou Ellen began but Will interrupted her.

"It's not possible okay? It makes no sense. Who would have powers that could hurt themselves? That's crazy."

"Not really," said Lou Ellen. "Nico's is sort of like that…" She drifted off when Nico shot her a glance. "What? I'm just saying you have, er, been known to injure yourself with your abilities quite a lot."

Nico opened his mouth to argue, but couldn't think of a good counter. She was right.

Will was already shaking his head. "Look, I don't know what happened back there, but I know my own abilities. I've lived with them my entire life. I can't do stuff like that. Maybe…" Will trailed off, seemingly lost in thought. His eyes lit up like something had occurred to him. "Maybe it was just Apollo?"

"Apollo?" Lou Ellen asked incredulously. She tucked a strand of redhair behind her ear. "Apollo's locked up. You saw him, remember?"

"Maybe he escaped," Will said eagerly, clearly warming to his idea. "Maybe he helped us!" Nico could see him grasping at strings, clinging to some bit of hope he'd somehow procured. Will's face fell when he was met by silence and his friend's passive stares, and he gave an uncharacteristic scowl. "Fine. I'm just trying to offer some sort of plausible explanation. I know I couldn't do that!"

"Will we were all right there, we saw you-," Cecil muttered.

"It wasn't me!"

"I think you might be right Will," Nico muttered suddenly. He frowned at the son of Apollo. "Maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was Apollo."

"I don't understand," said Lou Ellen. "Haven't we established that Python has Apollo? He couldn't have helped us! Sorry Will," she said, her voice softening. "I know you don't want to hear it but it's
true. And we broke the little bottle of his power we had! Who knows what happened to it."

"Thanks for reminding me," Will muttered miserably.

"But that's my point," Nico interrupted. "We don't know what happened to it or where it went." He took a deep breath and hoped the next part didn't sound as completely insane to his friends as it did to him. "Maybe we didn't lose it at all. Maybe we still have it."

"What are you talking about?" Asked Cecil.

I have no idea what I'm talking about, Nico thought to himself. He hesitated, unsure how to answer.

Lou Ellen gasped softly. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" she demanded.

Nico frowned at her. "I didn't say anything."

Lou Ellen acted like she hadn't heard him. "You think Apollo's power is in… Will?"

Dead silence met her words. The four of them shared shocked silence before Will broke it loudly.

"That- that's-," Will spluttered at her.

"Quite plausible?" suggested Nico.

"-completely insane! You're insane," Will told her. "You know that right?" Nico had to admit that, while it had sounded far fetched in his head, it sounded even more ridiculous out loud.

"Oh yeah?" Challenged Lou Ellen. "Then how'd you manage to roast yourself like that?"

"I said, maybe Apollo escaped!"

"That's even more insane than what I just said!" Lou Ellen retorted. She winced. "Which is actually really, really sad. Sorry Will."

Will looked down at his blistered arms with a frown. He raised his hand and held it over the skin, maybe a couple inches away, and furrowed his brow. A second his palm glowed brightly, shining light over the burnt flesh. He held it that way for a moment, and Nico waited for the skin to heal, for the redness to fade, but instead Will gasped loudly. The glow faded from his hand abruptly and he groaned and leaned back against his palm tree. His arms were still as burnt as ever. "Well that busts that theory," Will muttered. "If it were true you'd think I'd be able to heal myself."

"Not necessarily," Nico said edgily. A horrible thought had struck him, making his stomach clench tightly. "Maybe-," He stopped again. "You know, when that vial shattered Apollo's power might have clung onto the closest thing it could find that was related to Apollo-," he looked at Will, "-you- but it's just… well, demigods aren't immortal. Our bodies aren't meant to contain such a vast amount of power. It might have made you stronger, Will, but you're just… a little too human for it."

Will stared at him in disbelief. "So you're saying… you think I'm going to get burned from the inside-out?!!"

Nico winced. It sounded horrible like that. "Um, yes. Possibly." He took a deep breath. "It explains why you're not healing. It like trying to contain the power of a bomb inside-" Nico broke off.

Will gaped at him in disbelief. "Now your saying you think I'm going to explode?!!" he nearly yelled.
"Not explode!" Nico said hurriedly. "What you said before sounded pretty accurate actually. People aren't meant to hold the power of the sun in them." Will, Cecil, and Lou Ellen all stared at him, horror-struck.

"Sorry," Nico muttered. "I shouldn't be allowed to explain things." He knew he was freaking them out, being so blunt. He had practically announced that Will could combust at any given moment if he wasn't careful, but Nico couldn't help it. He was scared for Will, and for Apollo too. And by account of Nico's personal experiences in the past, being blunt was the best way to get a problem solved. Or at least the best way to get everyone on the same page.

"How do we get it out?" asked Will. "We can try to contain it in something else."

"I don't know if anyone besides a god could transfer power like that. Apollo's power latched onto you by itself. I don't think it's just going to let go," Nico said. "If we're lucky we'll reach _ and Apollo can take his power back himself."

Will nodded slowly, looking defeated finally. "Well let's look on the bright side," he said, ever the optimist. "At least we know where Apollo's power is now. That's something."

"Yeah, it is," Cecil said quietly.

A soft breeze ruffled Nico's hair and raised goosebumps on his arms. Blinking, he looked out towards the ocean, where gentle waves lapped over the sand. He hadn't noticed during their discussion, but the sun had sunk low in the sky, painting the top of the water a ruddy orange and blue hue. It was eerily beautiful, the sight of the sun falling beyond the horizon, but he also found it frightening. He wondered how many more days it had left if they didn't succeed on their quest. His stomach dropped at the thought and he tore his eyes away.

"It's getting dark out," Nico muttered. "Should we stay here for the night, or-" His stomach protested loudly at the words.

"My stomach agrees with yours, Nico," said Lou Ellen. "Dang, I wish we had our stuff. Not that I could eat that haggis. I'm not that desperate."

"Not yet," said Cecil. "Maybe some of the plants are edible on the island, like fruit, or-"

QUACK!

The entire group jumped violently and spun to look in the direction of the sound as best they could from their seated positions. Nico froze, heart pounding, staring at-

"Tell me that is not what I think it is," Cecil groaned. "Tell me I'm not looking at what I think I'm looking at."

A giant dodo bird stood ten feet from them, blinking serenely.

Quack!

"That's annoying," said Lou Ellen. "At least its not attacking us this time."

The bird waddled away from them, towards the forest. After a pause it turned its head around to peer at them.

Quack!
Then it let out that awful hissing sound Nico had heard them make before, and waddled a few more steps.

Quack!

"Are we supposed to... follow it?" Cecil asked uncertainly. The four of them traded dubious glances.

"It's worth a shot," said Lou Ellen. "Maybe it knows where to find food here."

"Will can you stand?" Cecil asked his friend.

Will nodded immediately, and he did stand, but Nico couldn't help but notice that he did so with difficulty. Will shuddered slightly and blinked hard like he was trying to clear his vision.

"We don't have to move-," Nico began, but Will cut him off.

"No, it's fine. It'd be dangerous anyways. I don't know what happened to the Oneiroi but they're probably still back there somewhere. What if Agnete took it upon herself to tell them where she sent us? No, we need to move."

Will's words made sense. Nico and Cecil collected their jackets, and gathered what little things they had left.

They found the dodo bird waiting patiently for them ten feet out from the trees. It's beady eyes lit up as they approached like it was excited they were finally listening.

Without further ado it hobbled into the trees, pushing its way through the leafy underbrush. The four demigods followed as best they could. Nico went first, Cecil last. Between them Will walked, Lou Ellen helping to support some of his weight. Nico was concerned that Will hadn't argued about her helping him; Will always tried to act stronger than he was. The fact that he'd accepted her help meant that he was feeling a lot worse than he let on.

The rainforest turned out to be hot and sticky. Before long sweat clung to Nico's clothes, saturating them. His shoes and socks were still damp and uncomfortable from being submerged in the ocean and his stomach growled. Behind him he heard Cecil slap at a mosquito on his arm. The dodo bird continued to lead the way, stopping every once in a while to look back and let them catch up.

"How far are we going?" Cecil wondered aloud, pushing aside a thick vine. "It's getting really dark in here..."

"Too far," said a voice.

It came from Nico's right and he turned quickly. Out of instinct he reached for his sword, forgetting he no longer had it. The feeling of his hand closing around thin air made his stomach drop. He raised his fists instead, and lashed out in the direction the voice had come from.

It made contact with a loud smack.

Nico reeled back, putting space between him and the new foe.

To his right he heard Cecil shout something, followed by an impact.

Nico finally got the first glimpse of the man who stood in front of him. He was tall, slender, and his green eyes were trained on Nico, watching him like a hawk. The entire length of his body was
painted in splatters of green and brown camouflage, with bits and pieces of moss and bark clinging to him. Even as far as he was from the demigods, Nico could tell he was in serious need of some deodorant. He had a bow in his hands.

Luckily Nico’s earlier blow had thrown him, preventing him from knocking an arrow correctly. Without hesitation Nico lunged forward, knocking the bow aside before the man had time to try again. His fist connected with his opponent’s face. Before he was knocked backwards too far, Nico grabbed the front of the man’s shirt, near the neck, and dragged him forward and down. From there Nico connected his knee with the man’s face, sending him sprawling.

He spun around in time to see Lou Ellen hurl a ball of grey smoke towards another attacker, this one a woman. It hit her square in the chest. There was a bang, a puff of smoke, and she emerged from the cloud as a tiny dodo bird. Apparently Lou Ellen had progressed from pig balls to dodo bird balls. If you could call that progress.

Beyond her Cecil delivered a thunderous kick to an attacker’s chest. The man flew backwards. "Take that," Cecil shouted. He looked towards his friends. "Lou!" he shouted.

The woman Lou Ellen had transformed into a dodo bird had decided to fly at the daughter of Hecate’s head, cawing madly. Lou Ellen yelped, and stumbled backwards, losing her balance.

Will, who had seemed dazed and slow to register the fight at first, reached a hand up to his mouth. Nico understood what he was about to do too late, and didn't have a chance to cover his ears. Will’s super sonic whistle split through his head, making his eardrums rattle.

The dodo bird dropped like a stone, screeching. The whistle had been enough to daze everyone in the immediate vicinity, but Cecil was the quickest to recover. Taking advantage of the enemies confusion, he threw his elbow into a nearby guy's face.

Everyone else surged into action. Just as Nico had ducked under a blow from one opponent, someone else wrapped their arms around him from behind. A foot connected with back of his knee and he collapsed to the ground.

"Nico!"

Will was shouting his name. Nico looked up and saw Will raising his hand, palm glowing with a bright light-

"Will don’t!"

Something connected hard with Nico's back and he fell hard, face-planting into the mud.

Nico was dazed. He heard shouting from all around him, could feel a sudden unnatural heat that had not been present before… and then it ended.

He didn’t know what had happened, but he slowly managed to push himself up, spitting mud and leaves from his mouth, and wiping more of the stuff away from his eyes. His vision was blurry, his heart racing. The first thing he could make out was Will, collapsed on the ground. Nico blinked hard, trying to clear his vision.

Lou Ellen was on the ground beside Will, gasping and bleeding from a scratch on her face. Cecil was the only one still standing, but now he was frozen with his hands in the air.

Nico turned, ready to attempt to continue the fight if he could, but blinked as he was met face-to-face with an arrowhead. Following the length of the shaft with his eyes he noticed it was the same
man he had first seen before. His nose was bleeding from when Nico had driven his knee into his face.

Nico didn't dare move with the arrow pointed into his face. He unclenched his fist and held his palms up, showing he wasn't going to fight.

"Nico!" Nico heard Lou Ellen gasp from behind him, followed by some movement.

"Don't move," the man ordered firmly. "You are completely surrounded now."

Nico heard shuffling coming from the surrounding bushes. Out of his peripheral he saw another couple of hunters step smoothly out from behind the broad green leaves.

"Drop weapons you have," said the man, his face inscrutable. "Do it slowly."

Nico's mouth was dry. "We don't have any weapons."

The man's eyes flicked down to Nico's waist and then back up. "Huh. I assume you won't mind if we made sure of that?" His green eyes shifted to something behind Nico and he gave the slightest nod of his head.

Nico jumped slightly when he felt rough hands touch him, patting him down. He felt like he was about to get arrested. Faint protests came from behind him, and a soft "Hey!", and he knew the same was happening to Lou Ellen, Will, and Cecil.

The person checking Nico knelt down to feel around his ankle. Nico wished he had tucked a knife of some sort into his shoes. It certainly would have been helpful. He resisted the urge to kick the man in the head.

"They're unarmed," confirmed another voice, this time female.

"That's what we said," Nico heard Cecil grumble. "Do you really think we would have fought like that if we could have used weapons?"

The man relaxed his hold on the bow slightly, letting the arrow sink down.

"Good. Bind their hands."

Nico grit his teeth together and let out a breath. He felt his hands grabbed and forced behind his back. He winced as a rope was wound around them, biting into his wrists. "What, you don't think you can handle a few unarmed teenagers?"

The man raised an eyebrow. Carefully, without taking his eyes off of Nico, he raised his fingers and wiped some of the blood from his nose. "Unarmed teenagers, yes. Demigods… I don't want to take any chances."

"What would you like to do with them Eupolis?" asked one of the women, directly behind Nico. It was she who had kicked Nico into the dirt and bound his hands.

Nico scowled at her.

The man- Eupolis- looked thoughtful.

"We could cook them," the man by Lou Ellen said brightly. "We need more bird food! Demigod would be a real special treat for them too."
"Not this again," Cecil groaned. "I've had enough of monsters saying they want to eat us."

"We can't bring them back with us," a red-headed guy said. "The others wouldn't be happy. It's already cramped enough underground. The last thing we need is their stench stinking up the place. This one here's looks almost dead anyways." He nudged Will with his foot, and Will glared at him.

"Don't touch me," Will muttered. If he had looked pale and disoriented before, he looked even worse now. His eyes moved slowly between their captors, unfocused. "I'm not almost dead."

"What's wrong with your friend?" Eupolis asked sharply.

Nico didn't particularly want to give the answer to that question to a complete stranger, so he simply muttered, "He's sick. Look, we have no interest in coming with you people anyways so why don't you just let us go? We'll leave you guys alone-," Nico stopped abruptly, eyes widening. "Wait, did you say you live underground?" He looked between their captors waiting for an answer but none was forthcoming. "Are you… Lotus Eaters?"

His words caused some of them to stir. A couple of them traded surprised glances.

Eupolis's brows drew together. "How do you know of us?"

"Agnete sent us," said Cecil.

Eupolis did not react. Nico couldn't tell what he was thinking but it was taking him a while. At last he opened his mouth, closed it again, then said, "In that case… kill them."

"What?!" Lou Ellen shouted angrily. "She said you would help us!"

"Did she now?"

"Yes," Lou Ellen stammered, hazel eyes wide and desperate. "We're on a quest. We need to get to Mount Parnassus. Agnete told us to come here first."

No one responded. Their captors exchanged glances. Most looked wearied by what Lou Ellen had said, some angry.

At last Eupolis took a deep breath. "Very well. We will bring you back with us and we'll talk. But first…" He looked over at one of his comrades and nodded.

Nico turned to look as well, right in time to feel something pinch his shoulder painfully. Looking down he saw what looked like a tiny dart sprouting from his shoulder.

"What…?" he slurred out through numb lips. Before he had time to register what had happened the forest dimmed and he knew no more.

Nico cracked his eyes open, to find himself looking at a dark, mossy ceiling. He tasted bile in his mouth, and his stomach lurched. Turning over onto his stomach he heaved over the side of the bed. Nothing came up. Wincing, he reopened his eyes, and found his face half a centimeter away from the dirt floor.

Surprised, he pushed himself up. He was laying on some sort of bed on the floor, on top of finely pressed dirt. The bed was made of leaves, vines, and bark, all woven tightly together. The damp scent of forest and mildew filled his nose. Nico inhaled deeply, trying to clear his head. It was still humid but a cool breeze touched his skin.
"Nico? Is that you?"


"I think so," Cecil said cautiously. "I just woke up. My head's pounding. I think they drugged us with those darts…"

Nico nodded, nervously. He wondered what these people, the Lotus Eaters, planned on doing to them. They had seemed angry at first, when Lou Ellen had mentioned Agnete, but then they had agreed to take them back to their village. Nico could only assume that was where they were now. Of course, then they had shot them with poisonous darts and dragged them who knew how far.

Nico looked over at Cecil, barely able to make out his form in the darkened room. He could see two other shapes on the other side of Cecil, whom he could only assume were Lou Ellen and Will.

Nico pushed himself up shakily, taking a moment to regain his legs, and carefully moved over to them.

Cecil noticed and pushed himself up from the floor as well. "I think they're alright. Lou should wake up soon, I think. I don't know about Will. He seemed pretty worn out before…"

The son of Hermes moved over to Lou Ellen while Nico went to Will's side. Now that his eyes were adjusting he could make out Will's face. Nico reached out gently and pressed his fingers to Will's wrist, feeling for his pulse. It was strong and steady. Nico breathed a sigh of relief.

"Lou?" Cecil whispered. He lay a hand on her arm and Nico saw her shift slightly, murmuring in her sleep. Her eyes cracked open and she peered blearily at Cecil.

"Cecil? What's going on? Where are we?"

"I'm not sure. Nico and I just woke up too." Cecil looked over at Nico. "Is Will awake?"

Nico shook his head mutely.

A light flickered on. Nico and Cecil turned, squinting in the light, to see Eupolis standing in the middle of the arched doorway.

Nico almost tried to reach for his absent sword again, but fought against it.

"How are we feeling?" Eupolis asked, green eyes flicking between Nico, Cecil, and Lou Ellen inscrutably. "Headache? Nausea? Constipated? We have some herbs that might help ease the symptoms."

Cecil eyed him distastefully. "Why did you poison us in the first place? If you wanted to bring us to your village you could have-"

"What?" Eupolis interrupted. "Asked? You attacked us, in our home. It is exceptionally rare for the children of the god's to wash up on our shores. You should not have known how to find us at all. You demigod's," he spat, "tread all over anything and everything you can reach, leaving ruin and destruction in your footsteps. Forgive me, if I do not trust the four of you at your word."

Nico supposed he had a point. "You don't have to worry about us knowing where your village is," he muttered. "We don't even know where we are."
Eupolis' eyes narrowed. "I am not surprised. The few who do show up here usually come by accident." His green eyes shifted past the three conscious demigods, to Will. "Would you care to tell me what is wrong with your friend? You said he was sick, but I sense it is more than that. He still has not woken up."

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil exchanged glances. "Will is…" Nico proceeded very carefully. "…too powerful. He used to much of his power and hurt himself. He's a son of Apollo."

Eupolis' eyes snapped back to Nico. He did not say anything immediately, but Nico got the impression the news meant something to him. "A child of Apollo…" he murmured, brow furrowing.

Before any of them could say more, a soft groan made Nico look around. Will was shifting slightly in his bed on the ground. Now that Nico was looking at him in the light he could see the sweat that beaded across his forehead, and the pallid tone that had taken over his normally tan skin.

"Will," Nico said, moving to crouch down by him again. "Are you okay?"

He was relieved when blue eyes met his own. For a moment Will looked as dazed and confused as Nico had when he'd first awoken. Nico helped him sit up, watching as Will gasped and then winced, reaching to place his hand across his forehead like he had a headache.

"What's going on," Will groaned, in clear discomfort. "What happened?"

"The Lotus Eater people knocked us out and brought us to their camp," said Lou Ellen. She reached up and ran a hand through her strawberry blonde hair, pulling leaves out.

"Oh."

"Will," Nico said quietly, hoping Eupolis wouldn't be able to hear him. "Before we were captured, did you try to use your powers again?"

Will winced, massaging his temple. "Uh- I don't think I really tried to. It just sort of happened, like instinct, I guess."

Nico cursed under his breath, causing Will to look sharply at him. "Why would you do that after what we talked about earlier? You need to be more careful, you could have killed yourself!"

"I didn't mean to," Will argued weakly. Nico forced himself to bite down the rest of what he wanted to say. Now was not the time to be admonishing Will for his recklessness when they had an eavesdropper in the room.

"This discussion isn't over," Nico told Will darkly.

Will sighed. "It never is."

Eupolis had watched their outburst silently. Seeing that they were done talking he crossed his arms. "I can tell you three have business to discuss, but if it's alright by you I'd like to discuss our business first. Come with me."

Nico, Will, Lou Ellen, and Cecil exchanged apprehensive glances but stood up and moved to follow him, Nico helping to support Will, who still seemed dizzy and more than a little out of it.

They followed him down a long hallway. Like the room they had just inhabited the walls, ceiling, and floor were all made of tightly packed dirt. Ferns appeared to have been woven underfoot like
some sort of earthy carpet. Strange markings had been carved into the walls, like hieroglyphics of some sort. They caught Nico's eye.

"What are those?" he asked, pointing with the hand that was not wrapped around Will.

Eupolis followed his gaze. "Signs from the outer world," he said.

"Signs?" asked Cecil. "What sort of signs?"

Eupolis shot him a look like he thought Cecil's question was ridiculous. "When the world beyond ours sends us signs we record them. We used to not receive them often, but ever since the wars started we have received many." He pointed to something that shared resemblance to a forest of cut down trees. "There is the son of the Earth, rising to power in a distant city." He pointed out a few more, which meant nothing to Nico. "There is one of the Earth herself, ascending from the ground,"- this time he motioned towards one that looked like a misshapen mountain springing from rocks.

Eupolis continued, "This one is the most recent; it was seen, oh I'd say, maybe two or three weeks ago? It depicts the arrival of the period of Pythia, the start of the Games." Nico followed the direction of his outstretched finger, pointing to the sign he described. It was the image of a dragon, fire coming from it's mouth, wings extended.

Lou Ellen's brow furrowed. "You saw this sign?" she asked incredulously. "You saw a dragon?"

Eupolis frowned. "No, I did not see it personally. A group of my people did when they were out gathering food one day. They returned home that night, speaking of the massive beast soaring the sky above."

"And a dragon marks the start of the Pythian Games?" Nico asked, doubtful.

"Not the dragon specifically. The Games seem to be attracting many unusual guests this year. Gods, Goddesses, monsters, the whole lot of them. It is not a stretch to assume that that was where the dragons destination was."

Nico wasn't sure if Eupolis was joking or just crazy. He'd met his fair share of monsters and yet never before had he ever come across a dragon.

Lou Ellen seemed to be echoing his thoughts. "Okay," she said mumbled edgily.

"Where exactly are you taking us?" Nico asked as they continued walking. The hallway was beginning to slope upwards steeply. His, as well as Cecil and Lou Ellen's, breaths were coming in gasps from the exertion. Even with Nico helping him walk, Will had turned a pale green. Nico sincerely hoped he wasn't about to throw up on him.

"Above ground," Eupolis informed him. "It is nearly sunrise."

"And sunrise means…?" Cecil asked timidly. Nico understood his apprehension; before they had been knocked one of the Lotus Eaters had Ahead of them Nico could see a doorway woven from various grasses. Dull sunlight leaked through the foliage, a welcoming sight.

"Breakfast," said Eupolis, pushing out into the sunlight.

Will hadn't been sure what to expect upon reaching the surface of the ground, and he found himself surprised by what he saw.
They had emerged from what he could only describe as a Hobbit hole; the large doorway opening from a shallow hill covered in yet more rainforest plants. They had emerged into an encampment of sorts. Small hut-like houses were scattered amongst the trees, camouflaged in layers of mud and moss. Outside one of them a young woman was sitting cross-legged, back leaning against the hut wall. She wore what appeared to be a long loincloth made of animal skin. She weaved what appeared to be a basket. A couple of small pixie-like children ran across their path, laughing. There were others outside as well, and most stopped what they were doing to eye the demigods with deep suspicion.

A small pathway not unlike a deer trail ran between the huts. Will followed it with his eyes until it was lost from sight, behind the trees.

"Is this your village?" Cecil asked Eupolis. He too was looking around curiously. Will hoped he wasn't entertaining the idea of whether anything would be valuable to steal.

"This is merely a small part of it," Eupolis informed them. "These are our homes. We just emerged from my personal home. It had a bit more room, not to mention if you tried to escape from it you would have been much more likely to get lost."

After spending so much time in caves recently Will found the sight of the outdoors welcoming, even if it was a little claustrophobic; they were still in the forest, the trees blocking out most of the light. Looking up, Will could see the first faint orange cracks of sunrise shining through the canopy of trees. He preferred more open spaces, where he could feel the sun on his skin.

Will tripped over a tree root. He felt Nico's arm tighten around him.

"You okay?" the son of Hades asked him. Will nodded.

He still felt dizzy and lightheaded, but not as bad as he had been before. Now that it was brighter out he could see that his skin looked a little better. It wasn't just his arms either; Will hadn't wanted to mention it to is friends, but his entire body felt like it had been torched after their encounter with the Oneiroi.

Eupolis looked back at him. "Yes, I took the liberty of rubbing a few of our salves on you. I don't know how you managed to get yourself so sunburned. You should take more caution. Have you ever heard of skin cancer?"

"Yes," Will muttered. Whatever Eupolis had rubbed on him had seemed to work, at least a little. Perfect, Will thought, so it's just my own powers that won't heal me.

"Why is your home so much larger than the rest?" asked Lou Ellen. "Are you the leader of these people?"

Eupolis opened his mouth, hesitating before answering. "Not officially. But I suppose, in a way I am the new leader."

Cecil frowned. "What happened to the old one?"

Eupolis had a dark look upon his face. "She fled."

"Oh." Cecil looked surprised. "Why did she flee?"

"It hardly matters now," Eupolis said tightly. "By all accounts she abandoned us. She's exiled."

"Wait," Will said, slightly breathlessly from the exertion of walking. His head spun. He hoped they
would sit down soon. "Are you talking about Agnete? She-

"Yes, yes, I know she sent you, you said this before. Several times," Eupolis said pointedly. "I would advise you not to speak her name at breakfast if you know what's good for you. The others already do not take kindly to trespassers on our island. Saying her name would make them trust you even less."

"But-" Will almost said, But Agnete sent us here! again, but he stopped himself in time. Will was confused. Were these the people Agnete had said she was trying to protect? My people, she had called them. Clearly they did not feel the same way towards her.

A man and woman passed the group of demigods, hand in hand, and glaring at them suspiciously. Will could hear the chatter of people speaking up ahead.

Rounding the bend in the trail, Will nearly stopped in his tracks. Before them lay a large glade, fitted with table and chairs, and full of Lotus Eaters. They all had the same luminous green eyes and were also caked in mud and leaves. Will couldn't particularly say he liked the stench of them. Tree stumps had been made into seats, the tables woven (of course) with branches.

"Eupolis!"

A woman ran up to them. Will recognized her from right before they had been knocked out. She had long, light brown hair which ran in a braid down her back, and intense green eyes. It was she who had been the one to knock Nico to the ground, and then bind his hands. Will figured she must be an exceptional fighter in order to be able to do so. He looked more closely at her and saw that she was well-toned. A knife rested at her waist. It looked to be made of bone.

Eupolis nodded. "Aminta. May I introduce you to-,

"Demi-gods," Aminta spat without ceremony. "Tell me your names and your godly parent."

Lou Ellen looked offended. "Hello to you too," she muttered.

Aminta swiftly drew the knife from her belt. "Do not waste my time," she snarled. "Or you may find yourselves discovering I have little patience. Somehow I don't think you'd like what I do to those who waste my time."

Cecil gulped. "I'm Cecil, son of Hermes. These are-" he quickly introduced Lou Ellen, Will, and Nico.

Aminta's hard eyes met Will's, unreadable. "A son of Apollo," she said, mostly to herself. "Why am I not surprised?"

Will took a steadying breath. "You're not?"

"You're here for your father, aren't you?"

Will blinked. "You know about what's going on? How Apollo's been captured?"

Aminta raised an eyebrow. "Everyone here does. How could we not, being this close to Mount Parnassus?"

"Mount Parnassus," Will repeated, stunned. "We're close to it?"

"It's a little over a day's journey from here by boat." Aminta's gaze finally softened. "The quest you
spoke of before, it is to save your father?"

"Yes."

"And it was Agnete who sent you here?"

Will nodded.

Aminta released a pent up breath. "And here I was beginning to suspect she was dead. I have not heard from her in so many months…"

Will blinked hard, trying to focus despite the fact that his surroundings were beginning to revolve.

"He needs to sit down," Nico said. As much as Will kind of liked having Nico so close to him, he was beginning to think he was in serious danger of puking on the son of Hades. Or passing out. Or both.

Aminta beheld them for another moment before nodding. "Go sit down. I will join you when I can. Then I want you to tell me everything you know about my sister."

She left, leaving the four demigods to gape at her receding figure.

"Her sister?" Lou Ellen looked disbelieving. "Aminta and Agnete are sisters?"

"I guess so," said Cecil. "Actually I can kind of see it."

"I must go as well," Eupolis excused himself, following Aminta.

They made their way to one of the tables, skirting around other Lotus Eaters who eyed them contemptuously. Will sank heavily onto one of the tree-stump-chairs and rested his head on his arms.

"You okay, Will?" asked Lou Ellen. "Maybe some food will make you feel better. I'm starved. I haven't eaten since… well, before we had to eat spaghetti with Nico's family. And even then we didn't eat very much."

The glade was quickly filling up with people. Will sat up and looked towards the sky where the sun was beginning to rise, painting heavens a combination of soft pink and blue. Thank the Gods, he thought. He wasn't sure he could take any more creepy, dark caves.

"Attention!"

Immediately everyone fell silent. Will, Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil all looked around. At one end of the glade a table larger than the rest sat, filled with important looking people. Eupolis sat among them. To Will's surprise he saw that it was Aminta who had spoken. She stood behind the center of the table, flanked on either side by a couple of dodo birds, speaking to everyone in the clearing.

"Kalimera," Aminta said. Will understood her Greek perfectly. "As some of you may have noticed, we have four guests with us today." Will, Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil shifted uncomfortably as about sixty people's gazes turned toward them. "Do not let them upset you. Never fear, I intend to get rid of them as soon as possible." Okay, so that didn't sound so good. "Until I have done so, they are under my protection." That was a little better. Aminta continued, "Now, I know many of you are worried by the omens we have seen over the past few weeks, particularly the one we saw a week ago. I know the arrival of four demigods is also a terrible, devastating omen, and I would like nothing more than to row them out to the center of the ocean and leave them there to drown, -"
Aminta paused, "-but we must remember that the Olympian's have all the power right now, and they might consider doing so to be politically incorrect."

"What the hell kind of speech is this?" Cecil whispered. "I don't like it."

"...And I know they also dragged up Agnete's accursed name, which again is another horrifying omen, but you shouldn't let that get to you either... but now, pushing all that aside, let us begin our prayers."

Everyone in the clearing then closed their eyes, and recited some sort of chant together. Will, Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil remained silent, not entirely sure what was happening. A dodo bird cawed loudly, making Lou Ellen jump.

The strange chant finally ended, and Aminta concluded her equally strange speech. She clapped her hands and a feast appeared on the tables in front of everyone.

For some reason Will thought of Dumbledore.

An assortment of raw roots, fruits, vegetables, and some sort of meat appeared. Will thought it looked suspiciously about the same size as a dodo bird. He almost gagged. Lou Ellen, Nico, and Cecil seemed to have had the same thought as him about the meat and only helped themselves to the vegetarian dishes. Besides the bird, everything else was amazing. Will hadn't realized how hungry he'd been.

"How is everything?"

Eupolis and Aminta had arrived at their table, and took no pause in sitting down with them.

"It's..." Lou Ellen's eyes drifted to the roasted bird carcass. "Um, quite delicious."

"Good," said Eupolis. "Now why don't you four go ahead and tell us everything about your quest."

"Forget their quest," Aminta said forcefully. "It's suicide. Tell me about my sister. How did you meet her?"

The four demigods exchanged glances and seemed to come to a silent unanimous decision. "We met her in Las Vegas..." Lou Ellen told them the story. She left out some of the details of their personal quest, but told them all of their speculations about how Agnete seemed to have developed multiple allegiances with various deities.

"Agnete, that foolish girl," Aminta said darkly when Lou Ellen had finished. "She's going to get herself killed. I told her that her plan was rash and dangerous."

"What is her plan?" Will said slowly. "If you don't mind me asking. Seriously, we can't figure out whose side she is on. Ours, or the Oneiroi, or Python's..."

Aminta shook her head. "She is not on anyone's side but her own."

Eupolis shot Aminta a look. "You know that it not entirely true." He turned to Will. "If you must know, everything Agnete has done she has done for us. We are her people, and she our leader."

"Was," snapped Aminta. "She was our leader."

Eupolis cast her a glance. "My apologies. Agnete was our leader until she was exiled. Now Aminta is-:"
"I am no leader," Aminta snarled at him. Several Lotus Eaters looked around at her. She lowered her voice. "And I never will be. I already told you, the position is yours, Eupolis, should you want it."

Eupolis sighed. "You would make a much better leader than me, Aminta. I am only a healer. I cannot fight, not as well as most. But you are a warrior, you could defend us-,

"I will defend us," said Aminta. "From Python, everything. I will do everything in my power to see that our species is saved, but I cannot do it as leader. I fight up front in a battle, and a leader must hold back. A leader must stay alive, hold back, watch as their people die around them-,

"I am not sure that's true," interrupted Eupolis. "Agnete did not think so."

"And now Agnete is no longer leader. She is lost, somewhere, exiled. She failed her duties and signed her own death sentence."

Eupolis frowned. "If what these demigods have said is true, that may not be the case. It sounds as if she is still trying to represent us, trying to make allies."

"She had never left this island before!" Aminta said in frustration. "She has no idea how the world works out there, and it sounds as if she has spread herself thin. She is going to get herself killed, or worse, all of us."

"If I may ask," said Nico. "Who are you people trying to protect yourselves from?"

Eupolis and Aminta exchanged glances. "That's a complicated question. I suppose it depends on who the highest bidder is," Eupolis said slowly. "Our people have had many foes and allies over the past millennia. Over the years our species has dwindled, as you can probably tell. There used to be thousands of us. Now, what you see here is what you get. Oh, I know there are a few scattered outposts around the world where you can find more of us, the Lotus Hotel being one of them, but the situation is still dire. Three days ago Python extended an invitation to the leader of our people, inviting us to his twisted games."

"Wait," Cecil interrupted. "You're not… planning on accepting are you?"

"It is not so simple," said Aminta. "We have been enemies with Python before. When Apollo defeated him eons ago, we celebrated alongside him and others. But now Python is back, stronger than ever, and the odds are quickly turning in his favor. Like I said, our island is close to the place he calls home now. If we refused his invitation… he would not be pleased."

Seeing the stricken look on their faces, Aminta added;

"Do not be mistaken; we do not wish for Python to win this battle, but we are a small group of people and we want to survive. It is, I believe, the reason Agnete fled to the Lotus Hotel- she was hoping to gain Zeus's favor by offering to watch his son for him. Unfortunately she did not predict how far Python's reach had extended, and Apollo was taken. I believe it was desperation that drove my sister to side with the Oneiroi. She is trying to protect us."

Aminta's words were met with stricken silence.

"Well, we may be able to help with that," said Will. "We also want to see Python defeated. We want to save Apollo. We could help each other. If you help us with our quest, we could put in a good word for you to the Gods."
"And what if your quest fails?" asked Aminta. "Who's to stop Python from destroying us all if he thinks we helped you?"

Will heart sunk. As much as he hated to admit it, she was correct. And unfortunately, he also got where she was coming from. In a way, Aminta was trying to save her own family. Just like Agnete. Just like himself. He couldn't ask her to do this, it wasn't right.

"Do not look so glum, son of Apollo," said Aminta. "I said we would not help you with your quest. I did not say we wouldn't tell you how to get to Parnassus. I can give you directions to get there, if you wish, but that is all."

Will swallowed and nodded.

Aminta stood up from the table. "When you have finished eating Eupolis will show you where you may sleep for the day. I will see you tomorrow."

They stared after her in bewilderment.

"Um… does she know it's sunrise?" Lou Ellen asked blankly.

Eupolis chuckled. "Our people prefer the dark. It is the reason we like caves and being underground. To us, when the sun is shining is the time for us to sleep. This breakfast that you are eating is, I think, what your kind would refer to as dinner."

Lou Ellen gaped at him.

Eupolis shook his head. "You know, for Aminta insisting she is not a leader, she sure orders me around like one. Come, I will show you to your room."

Their room as it turned out, ended up being a large hut nearby the cave entrance they had exited from earlier. It had a total of six cots in it, two extra that wouldn't be used of course, but Will was just glad to not have to go in another cave.

They each sat on their respective beds and looked at each other.

"So," Cecil said. "What do we do from here? We can hardly show up at Parnassus weaponless. We don't even know how to get in without anyone noticing us."

"Maybe we can ask Aminta if she could supply us with weapons," Will suggested. "And she said she could help us get there. Maybe she'll know how we can get in." He stifled a yawn. "I've never been a fan of being nocturnal but I think I could sleep for a little bit. You guys don't have to stay if you don't want. I'll be fine here by myself."

Eupolis had told the four of them they could explore the village if they so desired.

"I might go out, then," said Lou Ellen. "I want to ask about some of the herbs they use. And I've heard that Lotus Eaters are quite adept at controlling the mist. Maybe they could teach me something."

"I'll go with you," Cecil offered. "Want to come Nico?"

"Actually-," Will interrupted before Nico could answer. "I'd like to talk with Nico for a minute, if that's alright."

Nico looked at him, clearly confused.
Cecil looked back and forth between them. "Er, okay. Well, we'll be back soon."

"What's this about?" Nico asked after they had left. He sat across from Will, on his own bed.

"I wanted to ask…" Will hesitated briefly. "What else happened in the Labyrinth, before you came out? I know you said you went into your old school, but something else had to have happened. You couldn't have gotten out that easily."

Nico had frozen. He looked at Will with dark, shocked eyes.

Will hurried on. "Look, I know you've been through some stuff over the past year, and I know you don't like talking about it… but I have to ask. Did you see… Tartarus?"

Nico didn't answer. He opened his mouth, clamped it shut again, and looked down at his hands. Will could see the gears turning in his head as he thought.

"I'm sorry, Nico," Will said, his mouth going dry. "That must have been hard. Did you think… did you think you were stuck there again? Alone?"

Nico's head snapped back up. He eyed Will wearily, but suddenly latched onto his question like he had been inspired by it.

"Erm… yeah, I guess." Nico cleared his throat. "Yeah, I guess it was sort of like going through it again…” He trailed off, staring into space.

Will nodded. "Okay. Well, I'm glad you made it out. I just want you to know, if you ever feel like you need to talk about it, you can. To me, I mean. To any of us, actually. Me, or Cecil, or Lou. We all care about you."

Nico looked at him for a few seconds, pondering Will. He looked away suddenly and blinked hard. "Thanks, Will," he said softly.

Will took a deep breath. "Don't mention it. Did you still want to catch up with Lou Ellen and Cecil? I doubt they've gone far…"

Nico nodded. "I think so. You wanna come?"

Will shook his head. "I hate missing out, especially since it's actually sunny out for once, but I kind of just wanna lay down right now. Come wake me up in an hour or so if I'm still asleep."

Nico watched his face carefully, before nodding. "Alright. Have a good nap Will."

Will grinned. "Thanks."

After Nico left, Will lay back down on his cot and stared at the earthy ceiling, eyes tracing the vines.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had forgotten to mention the mysterious goddess who had spoken to him before he used his powers in the Oneiroi's lair. She said she had been searching for Apollo for days, that she had recognized Apollo's power within Will. Will couldn't be certain but there was only one goddess he could think of who was familiar enough with Apollo to be able to recognize his power like that. If she hadn't spoken to him, Will might never have known to use the power within him. They might have been killed by Morpheus and his brothers.

Thanks Artemis, Will thought.
A moment later a feeling of warmth passed down his spine and he knew he had guessed correctly.

It didn't take long before he was asleep.

He was laying on a cold cement floor again, chills wracking his body. He shuddered. Even that small movement sent agony through him. They had not even bothered to chain his feet together this time, only his wrists. He guessed they figure he wouldn't be able to stand anyways. Gritting his teeth, he attempted to push himself up, only to collapse back onto the floor.

He heard a metallic creak as the cell door swung open.

Not again, he thought, wild panic shooting through him. His mortal heart raced in his chest. Not already.

But then Python's sinister voice snaked into his ears. "Don't worry, Apollo. I am not here to question you more, not for now anyways. You can rest easily knowing the worst is over. I will go easier on you from now on. It is time for you to rest, regain some of your strength. You will need it for what is to come."

He heard Python laugh softly.

"I know you hold the sport of archery dear to you. But I have taken the liberty to have you fight in what is my personal favorite sport; the glory of the arena. If it is any consolation, one of your children is on the way. He will have the honor of watching you die. And then, once you have perished, he can flee home to the rest of your children and inform them of your fate. None will dare follow in his footsteps. It is time for history to be rewritten; what was once known as the story of the Sun God and his defeat of the Great Serpent will be no more. Four days from now the story will be retold as this; The Lord Python and his extermination of Zeus's pathetic excuse of a son. I look forward to it…"

Apollo could not find any words to answer with.
Chapter Fourteen:

Island of Misfit Demigods

Nico found Lou Ellen and Cecil back in the heart of the rainforest-village, admiring the wares of what appeared to be some sort of street vendor.

"Hey, Nico," Cecil greeted him as he approached, brown eyes dancing from something apparently humorous. Beside him Lou Ellen was clutching some sort of hideous doll-like thing.

"This is quite cool," she was saying, turning it over in her hands. "It'd make a good gift for one of my siblings… too bad none of their birthdays are coming up."

"Erm…" Cecil stared dubiously at the grotesque doll.

The vendor, a little old lady with poison-green eyes and an equally pernicious smile, nodded. "Indeed, child. I find them to be great gifts for children to play with. Pins are sold separately, but you can choose from a great range of sizes."

At the front of the stand stood a sign:

All Voodoo Dolls 20% off!

"I'll think about it," Lou Ellen promised the woman, setting the doll back down. "Hey Nico. How's Will doing?"

Nico shrugged. "I think he's okay. He's sleeping now which is good. He looked ready to drop earlier."

"What did he want to talk to you about?" asked Cecil. He had shed his jacket and seemed to be enjoying the vitamin D the early morning sun offered. They started walking together through the trees, farther into the village.

"Oh…" Nico hesitated before answering. "Just… you know, seeing if I was okay."

Lou Ellen and Cecil shared a glance that made Nico suspect they were also sharing an inside joke, and he felt compelled to add, "He wanted to know about what happened in the Labyrinth. He escaped before me, so he was curious."

"What did happen after we were taken?" Cecil asked curiously.

Nico began twisting the skull ring on his finger, almost without thinking. It was a nervous habit, he knew, but somehow it made him feel better. "We ran into Clovis who helped explain to us how to get out, then we went out back and saw a house from Will's past-" Nico stopped as a thought sprung to mind. "Hey, you guys know that Will is adopted, right?"

Cecil and Lou Ellen looked surprised. "Of course. Didn't you?" Lou Ellen said, tucking a strawberry-blonde braid behind her ear.

The village was growing quieter as the sun rose and the inhabitants retreated to the closure of their homes. As the sun struck the ground, warming it and evaporating the raindrops that clung to the
foliage, steam seemed to rise in the air. Nico felt like he was in a sauna (or at least it was how he imagined a sauna would feel - he'd never actually been in one).

"Actually I didn't," he said quietly. "I never heard him mention it and I- I never asked him. I know he has a sister, back in Texas. He showed me a picture of her once."

"Yeah, Melanie." Lou Ellen scuffed the heel of her shoe in the dirt. "And there's his mom, Angela. Technically she's his aunt, but she may as well be his mom."

Lou Ellen fell silent for a moment, brows knit together as she pondered her thoughts. "It's weird to think about. I think most of us demigods are used to feeling abandoned by at least one parent, granted usually it's the godly one. I get that sometimes mortal parents can suck too, but it's rare for demigods to actually end up in the foster system."

Nico understood what she was saying. It was true, he had felt abandoned by his father before, had never truly known his own mother, even felt abandoned by his sister. But with them he could understand the reasoning behind their actions. It was so easy for him to feel anger and spite towards them, but in his heart he knew how illogical it was. In their own ways, they had all fought to protect him.

Nico cast his two companions a look. Cecil had his head bowed, thinking. Lou Ellen looked more matter-of-fact. "What about you guys?" he asked cautiously.

Lou Ellen and Cecil exchanged another glance.

"My mom died when I was twelve," said Cecil. "I went to go live with my grandparents afterwards. They're... alright."

"Oh," Nico said, hoping he hadn't intruded. That would've been... three years ago? "I'm sorry. If you don't mind me asking, what happened?"

Cecil took a deep breath. "It's fine. I mean, I've moved past it since then. I guess I should start by mentioning that I spent most of my life not knowing Hermes was my father, not knowing I was a demigod. Strange things happened around me of course, I got followed by monsters, expelled from a ton of schools, we moved around a lot. And, I don't know if you noticed, but I'm sort of a klepto. When I was younger I would steal all kinds of stuff; it started out with just random things, pencils from school, erasers, but it got worse. I never got caught either. I knew it was wrong, but... I thought I needed to. I thought I was helping my mom."

"How?" asked Nico.

"We're pretty poor. I'd bring back food, toothpaste, little amenities we needed. I'd feel bad sometimes but I was trying to help my family." Cecil grimaced. "You know how Will likes to say he thinks he missed out on most of Apollo's abilities? That all he can do is heal? Sometimes I think I sort of ended up in the same boat. Hermes isn't just the god of thievery. He's also a messenger, a traveler. I know you wouldn't think it from meeting me."

"That's not true, Cecil," interrupted Lou Ellen. She gave him a small smile. "You're a great messenger. You can be very persuasive."

If Nico wasn't mistaken, he thought Cecil blushed.

"Anyways, one time I decided to hotwire a car."

"A car?" Nico repeated, surprised. "Seriously?"
Cecil nodded. "Yeah. But then I did get caught. I got sent to juvie for it, and while I was there I was attacked by some of the kids there. They were monsters obviously, and I was the only one who could see them. I tried to avoid them but one day they cornered me. I beat several of them up but there were too many and I had no training. I ended up getting taken to the hospital. It was the final straw for my mom. She showed up and tried to tell me she was sending me to Camp Half-Blood, only I didn't know what it was at the time. I thought she was simply trying to get rid of me. We got in this huge fight and I- I ran away. I didn't go far. I just spent the whole night wandering through the city, trying to clear my head. I was terrified I was going crazy. In the end I realized what she had told me, about monsters and the Gods, sort of made sense considering everything I'd seen. I decided I wanted to go back home and apologize."

Cecil broke off, chewing his lip. "But when I got back… someone had broken in. They had been looking for me, I could feel it. The whole apartment was torn up, papers scattered everywhere, furniture shredded. My mom, she, um… it looked like she had tried to barricade herself in her room. I called nine-one-one but…” Cecil swallowed. "She, um, didn't make it."

Lou Ellen took a half-step closer to Cecil then, even as they walked, her arm brushing against his. Nico pretended not to notice.

"Oh," he said softly, wishing he hadn't asked.

"I was pretty messed up over it," Cecil continued. "I promised myself I would hunt down those who did it. But then I remembered what she had told me about needing to learn to fight and defend myself. I- I prayed to my dad for the first time, and he showed me how to get to camp."

Cecil took a deep breath. "Now I stay at camp most of the year. I go visit my grandparents for the Holidays usually, and do some school stuff. They wrote me off as homeschooled, which I like. I can still get an education without the boringness of sitting in classes all day."

"And it mean I get to see you more," Lou Ellen added quickly with a grin. She looked at Nico. "I got extremely lucky with my life. My father lives in Vermont. He remarried after my mom, and she has a couple of stepdaughters. I don't see them that often but I like them." Lou Ellen broke off suddenly, eyes widening as she took in their surroundings. "Hey, this place is really beautiful."

They had been walking along the pathway, which had slowly grown narrower and more secluded. To their left, the dense rainforest extended as far as the eye could see.

To the right, a pond, not unlike a swimming hole. The clear blue waters gleamed like crystals under the patches of sunlight that leaked through the trees. Large, tropical flowers bloomed along the edge of the waterline. Farther ahead Nico could see where the trail suddenly steepened, curving upwards between moss-covered boulders. The pond seemed to be situated at the base of a shallow cliff. A waterfall splashed down from the rocks, sending mist out and creating bubbles in the water below. Nico felt some of the droplets land on his face.

"It is," Cecil agreed.

Nico may not have been a fan of the outdoors, but even he had to admit the place was beautiful.

Lou Ellen walked to the waters edge and dipped her fingertips in. "It's warm," she announced. She proceeded to sit down in the grass, under one of the patches of sunlight.

Cecil quickly joined her, but Nico hesitated, unsure.

Lou Ellen looked over her shoulder at the son of Hades. "I hope your not waiting for some grand
invitation, Nico. Come on! Come sit. I need to recharge some of my magic anyways. I used a ton of it against the Oneiroi and turning that Lotus Eater into a dodo bird."

Nico did as he was bid, though still feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

Truth be told, this wasn't something he was used to. While he could safely say he was starting to feel more comfortable interacting with people when he needed to, he wasn't accustomed to sitting around with them in the sun just for the sake of it.

"Does sitting in the sun help with that?" Nico asked, genuinely curious.

Lou Ellen shrugged. "Probably not, but it makes me feel better. Don't you like the sun?"

Nico wasn't sure how to answer that. "Umm, I don't know. I usually prefer the shadows but I suppose the suns been growing on me." He winced. "Don't ever tell Will I said that."

Lou Ellen grinned at him.

"Nico?" Nico heard a faint voice shout. "Lou? Cecil? Are you guys out here?"

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil exchanged disbelieving looks.

"Speak of the devil." Cecil pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. "I think he heard you. Will has a sixth sense about that sort of thing."

Lou Ellen giggled as they heard Will shout louder. "Nico?"

Nico didn't answer them. He jumped up and ran to the last bend they had come around, leaving Cecil and Lou Ellen gazing after him from their spot by the water.

Sure enough, Nico's eyes fell upon Will's shaggy blonde head of hair as he made his way through the trees.

"Will," Nico called. Will's eyes focused on Nico and he visibly relaxed. "We're over here."

"Thank the Gods I found you," Will said when he reached him.

"I thought you needed to lay down," said Nico, leading the way back to Cecil and Lou Ellen who still sat by the edge of the pond. They waved at Will. "That was hardly an hour. How did you even find us?"

Will shrugged. "One of the Lotus Eaters saw you guys head this way." Will's grin faded a little. "And Eupolis came by again and woke me up. He brought us some stuff too, clothes, toothbrushes, that sort of thing. Not that I slept much..."

Lou Ellen's brows knit together as Will sat down beside her. "You didn't have another dream did you?"

"Erm, yeah. I did actually." Will bit his lip, eyes tracing the patterns on the surface of the water.

Nico was instantly alert. "What happened?"

Will let out a shaky breath. "Not too much. I saw my dad again, except this time Python was with him. He, uh, told him he was going to fight in the games. In the arena."

Will scooped up a handful of dirt, watching it fall through his fingers. Nico got the impression he
was trying to distract himself.

"Oh, Will," Lou Ellen breathed. "I'm sorry. But it's not for a few days right? We still have plenty of
time to get there."

Will nodded glumly. "I guess. But it's all coming true. Everything I'm seeing, it's happening.
There's no stopping it."

"You can't know that," Cecil told him firmly. "Aren't prophecies always this cryptic? They say one
thing and mean another. Maybe it's the same with these dreams. We will save Apollo, Will."

"That's… actually not what I'm thinking about," Will muttered. For the briefest of moments, his
eyes met Nico's.

Suddenly Nico found himself thinking back to their conversation in the Lotus Hotel and Casino,
when Will had finally admitted the contents of his first dream, the one where he had apparently
tried to kill Nico.

Nico was still dubious about that one. Granted, he knew he had only known Will for a whopping
total of about three weeks now but he could not, for the life of him, imagine Will ever hurting
anyone, ever.

It was partly horrifying to realize how much he had come to trust the son of Apollo over the past
few weeks.

"We should contact camp," Will said suddenly, sitting up straighter. "We need to find out if Jason
ever managed to talk to Zeus. Does anyone have drachmas left?"

Nico, Cecil, and Lou Ellen all shook their heads, and Will's face fell.

"Let me try anyways," said Lou Ellen. "Iris likes me. Occasionally she used to speak to me through
my mirror- or, she did before the Oneiroi stole it- and we would trade our best vegan recipes with
each other."

"That's… weird." Will said, taken aback. "But okay."

Lou Ellen gazed into the mist from the waterfall.

"Oh Iris, goddess of the Rainbow, please accept my offering of… um… this delicious gluten-free,
non-GMO, dairy-free, nut-free, soy-free brownie recipe made with stevia and wheat germ."

Lou Ellen proceeded to recite a recipe. "Um, okay, so start by preheating the oven to 350 for dark,
nonstick pans, or 325 for glass…"

By the time she had finished, nearly five minutes later, all three boys were staring at her with their
eyes glazed over.

Nico realized his mouth was hanging open and snapped it shut.

"…and then let sit for ten minutes or until cool and… enjoy," Lou Ellen finished finally.


It seemed to do the trick. The mist before them shifted, converging until it was solid enough to
form an image.
"...Kevin, this is the pointy end! Stop sticking yourself with it." Jason's eyes fell upon the Iris message and brightened considerably. "Practice amongst yourselves for a minute. When I get back, no one had better be bleeding out again."

Jason sheathed his sword and walked over. "Hey guys!"

"New campers?" asked Will.

"You would think, but no." Jason straightened his glasses. "How goes the quest? Did you guys make it out of the Labyrinth yet? Clovis mentioned something about how screwed you all were. It had us worried."

"I'll say. Yeah we made it out. And we met the Oneiroi, but they tried to take me hostage and eat these three-," Will motioned to Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil, ",-and now we're on some weird island with dodo birds and lotus eaters. Have you managed to talk with Zeus?"

Jason's expression sank. Whatever he had to say, he apparently did not think it good. "I did," he said slowly.

"And?"

"He said there was nothing he could do for Apollo. He said he had to start making plans for the inevitable, and for me to wish you guys good luck. Er, he also said that should you meet Python he hopes your deaths won't be too painful."

"That's it?" Will said in disbelief. "That's all he had to say?"

"Yeah." Jason winced. "It wasn't easy getting him to talk to me either. I tried praying but he didn't answer. Finally I spent almost an hour screaming at the sky in the middle of camp while everyone stared at me. I think the the only reason he answered then was because he found it embarrassing."

Will sighed. "At least you tried. In any case I hope he's still listening because Apollo asked me to get him a message."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "You spoke to Apollo?"

"In a dream," Will confirmed. "He wanted me to tell Zeus that he lied about the keys."

"The keys?" Jason repeated, eyes widening. "That's huge! What else did he say?"

"Er... Just that Zeus sucked."

Jason's face fell once more. "Oh. I'll make sure to tell Zeus about the keys, but I'll probably keep that last bit to myself."

Will nodded. "I figured. How's my cabin doing?"

"Same old, really," Jason said. "They're anxious - worried about you of course - but nothing else bad has happened to them."

"It looks rainy there," Lou Ellen noted. "Is everything okay?"
"There was a huge thunderstorm a couple nights ago," said Jason. "Thunder, lightning, the works. I'm not entirely sure what happened, but I reckon Zeus found out about Hermes stealing Apollo's power from him. It's been raining ever since. The border's not even keeping it out."

"About that…" Will muttered, sharing glances with his companions and coming to a silent agreement. "You know how I mentioned we broke the vial- that we thought we had lost Apollo's power? I think we may have found it."

"That's great news! Where do you think it is?"

Will looked nervous. "Erm, in me?" It came out sounding like a question.

Jason's brow furrowed. "What do you mean 'in you'?"

"We think that Will might be… containing Apollo's power, sort of like the vial was," said Nico.

Jason took a second to respond. "Huh. Weird."

"Jason!" a girl's voice shrieked from somewhere out of Nico's view. "Helen's stopped breathing! She needs CPR!"

"Yeah right, I'm not falling for that again," Jason shouted back. "I should probably go. Do you guys need anything else?"

"No, that was it," Will told him. "Say hello to everyone for us."

"Will do," said Jason. "Good luck guys." He waved his sword through the image and the mist dissipated.

Will fell silent when the image vanished. "At least they all seem okay," Nico said.

"Yeah." Will sighed, plucking a piece of grass.

"And we pretty much already knew Zeus wasn't going to help us," Cecil added. "Gods rarely do on quests."

Will nodded slowly. "We need to get off this island," he said tonelessly. "If the Lotus Eaters won't help us then we should cut our losses and move on."

Nico was taken aback by how mercenary he sounded. He sounded… well, sort of like Nico.

Nico didn't like it.

"I know you want to rescue your dad, Will," Nico said, "but it might be in all of our best interests if we didn't just rush in. We've gone straight from the Underworld, to the Labyrinth of Dreams, to almost getting captured by the Oneiroi, to crash landing in the ocean and fighting with Lotus Eaters... Aminta said Parnassus was close, a day's journey by boat. If we wait another day we'll still have time."

Lou Ellen nodded. "Plus my magic's pretty depleted right now. If I had to fight I don't think I'd be much use. I need to recover."

"Not to mention we're weaponless," Cecil added. "If we rush there now, we'll have no supplies, no plan, and no idea what we're doing. We need to regroup."

Nico could tell Will didn't like it, but he nodded. "Okay. I guess that makes sense. What should we
do in the meantime? We probably won't see Eupolis and Aminta again until later."

"Speaking of them," said Lou Ellen, "Did I hear you say Eupolis brought us clean clothes to change into?"

"Yeah," said Will. "Among other stuff."

Lou Ellen blew out a breath, standing up. "I'm sold. Getting cleaned up sounds amazing right about now."

Nico had to agree.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they arrived back at the little hut they'd been given. They took turns getting cleaned up and changing in the small bathroom. Nico was surprised they even had working plumbing.

The rest of the day was spent between a combination of catching up on sleep and exploring the little village. Cecil returned with food at one point (Nico thought it best not to ask how he'd gotten it) and the four of them sat around on the front steps, relaxing in the outdoors.

"We should probably all go to sleep," Lou Ellen suggested eventually.

Nico frowned. It was early afternoon.

"If the Lotus Eaters wake up at night, that's when they'll want to talk. We should sleep now, while we can," she elaborated.

Nico supposed it made sense.

It felt strange to be going to bed with the sun still out- Will had looked particularly displeased- but eventually Nico drifted off to sleep.

Perhaps it was because he had gone to bed at an odd time, but Nico had a rather odd dream.

He was laying in the sun with Bianca, feeling the grass on his feet. He felt calm, at peace, the sun warming him to his core. He chewed on a square of ambrosia that tasted like lemonade, and watched as the birds flew by overhead. He was laughing with his sister, over some silly story she was telling. Honestly he hadn't even been paying that much attention to what she was saying, but he found himself enjoying being in the moment with her.

A cloud must have passed over the sun then, because a shadow hit his face.

Nico cracked an eye open, to see a dark figure staring down at him, his face hidden in the shadows. Nico gasped, his heart missing a beat in his chest. He pushed himself up, scrabbling backwards in the grass. The figure moved slowly after him. Try as he might, Nico couldn't seem to get away from him.

"I thought you might need a reminder, son of Hades, of what you have promised me. Do not forget our deal. Remember what you owe me."

Nico flinched as the figure reached out a gloved hand, pressing it into his shoulder. Agony exploded through him where the man touched him and he threw back his head-

"Nico?" Will's hushed whisper awoke him. "Nico what's wrong?"

Nico sat bolt upright, panting, still able to feel the burn of the man's hand upon his chest. Will was
on his knees beside Nico's bed. Nico felt a hand brush through his hair. He gasped in surprise, eyes searching to make out Will's face in the darkness.

"I-," Nico realized he was shaking. His hands still clutched the blankets, wracked by faint tremors. Nico looked around. On the other side of the room Cecil and Lou Ellen appeared to still be asleep. "Bad dream. I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"No," Will murmured. Nico watched as Will slowly retracted his hands, folding them together. "I was already awake."

Nico's eyes flicked up to his face. "Can't sleep?" Nico watched as Will froze, and then shook his head.

"Not really. But the suns starting to go down so I reckon we got a few hours."

Nico followed his gaze towards one of the windows to see Will was correct. The outside world had dimmed, turning a soft auburn. It looked to be sundown.

Will seemed to notice he was still kneeling beside Nico's bed. He stood up, stepping backwards, and sat on his own.

Nico watched him. After a moment he whispered, "Are you afraid of having more dreams?"

He could see the dark curve of Will's nose and mouth against the moonlight. He found himself admiring the shape as Will spoke.

"Every time I see my dad again in my dreams, it's like... there's a knife twisting in my chest. Python is hurting him and I can't make it stop. All I can do is see it. Feel it. He's not used to being mortal. I can feel his fear." Will leaned his head back against the wall with a soft thump, closing his eyes. Nico watched his chest rise and fall as he took a deep breath. Will cracked an eye open to see Nico watching him. "Is this what it's like for you? Being scared to fall asleep, scared of what you'll see? I don't know how you stand it."

Nico didn't really know how to respond to that.

"Sort of," he answered honestly. "But my nightmares only make me worry about myself. I think-," Nico faltered, trying to figure out how to phrase it. "I think it's worse when you're worried about someone else."

Nico could feel Will's gaze burning the side of his face, like the sun was beating down on him. Nico's face even seemed to be growing hotter. He looked over at Will again, but as he did so he caught a glimpse of Will's feet.

"You're wearing shoes," Nico whispered. His mouth felt dry. "Were you about to sneak out?"

A faint smile twisted at the corner of Will's mouth. "Don't make it sound so bad. I was just going to go for a walk. I wanted fresh air. Besides, we should be waking up shortly anyways. We need to talk with Aminta right?"

Nico supposed that was true.

"Do you..." Will hesitated, eyes searching Nico's face. "I don't suppose you want to come along?"

Nico frowned. "Right now? You're still going?"
He saw Will shrug his shoulders. "Why not? Neither of us seems to be sleeping."

Nico pushed himself up onto his hand, trying to get a better look at the son of Apollo. He had trouble making out Will's face in the dark, but he sounded completely serious.

The silence dragged on as the seconds ticked by, until at last Nico came to a decision. In any case Nico certainly didn't want Will to be wandering around alone outside in the dark. He kicked his legs over the side of the bed and began pulling on his shoes.

"Alright then."

The Lotus Eaters were definitely a nighttime-people, as Nico and Will soon discovered.

The road through their village had been lit with luminous flames as the sun sank below the horizon, not unlike streetlamps. They cast a purplish-blue glow over the surroundings. The paths were cluttered with people, vendors, and dodo birds. The scent of barbecue and various spices wafted through the air, making Nico's mouth water. All around them, people laughed, talked, and went about their nightly business. Nico sidestepped as a group of green-eyed children ran between him and Will. The faint twang of some sort of musical instrument carried over the chatter.

In a way it reminded Nico of some sort of miniature, down-town night-life.

Up in the canopies of trees, lights glimmered like fireflies. They passed a small clearing in which a group of women were dancing to the beat of drums and some sort of instrument not unlike a pan flute. The women's skirts streamed out around them, their bare feet kicking up dirt as they twirled.

"Geez," said Will. "Cecil and Lou Ellen are missing out. It's crazy at this time."

Nico wasn't sure he would call it 'missing out' but he couldn't deny that he found the Lotus Eaters' way of life sort of fascinating.

Will pointed past Nico, to the right. "It's noisy here, let's go this way."

Nico looked and realized it was the same pathway they had gone down before, where the swimming hole was located. He almost hadn't recognized it at night. The pathway was now lit with the same purple lights that adorned the rest of the village.

"So now that we've established I'm scared to sleep," Will said as they walked, "What is it you were dreaming about?"

Nico chewed his lip, unwilling to answer. "The usual," he said finally. He cast a glance at Will's face, but it was unreadable. "Actually it started off okay. I was with Bianca."

"And then?"

Nico took his time responding. "And then… I'm not sure what happened. I saw a man standing there."

Nico's heart twisted in his chest as he remembered the words the man had spoken to him.

"Remember what you owe me."

His shoulder seemed to throb as he remembered the phantom pain he had felt under the man's touch.

"A man?" Will asked.
"Yeah. He touched my shoulder."

"And?"

"That's all," Nico said, his heart beating rapidly. "It didn't mean anything."

For a moment Nico worried that Will would see right through his lie. He could feel the son of Apollo watching him closely. Luckily Nico was pretty good at lying.

"Hmm."

Part of Nico wanted to tell Will everything; about the deal he had made with Tartarus, a deal he made to protect Will, but Nico knew he couldn't. Will would hate him if he ever found out. He would not be able to understand why Nico had done it, would not understand his reasoning.

Nico hardly understood it himself.

He didn't know what Tartarus wanted from Will, just as he didn't know what Python wanted from him. The only thing Nico was sure of was that Will had to be protected from them at all costs.

Nico wasn't even certain of when or why Will Solace had become so important to him- heck, a mere month ago he might have believed that it was impossible for him to ever care for anyone ever again. He'd been too bitter, too full of rage. The only person Nico had ever allowed into his heart after Bianca died was Hazel, his sister.

Nico looked over at Will, eyes traveling over his tall frame. When Nico had first seen him, Will had struck him as almost cat-like. Relaxed, steady, easy-going, maybe a little headstrong. Now he knew Will was all of that and more. He was passionate, a terrible musician, the best healer, had no usable skills in a fight, and cared more about helping people than he cared for himself.

Nico wasn't used to caring about anyone he wasn't obligated to. Hazel was his sister. Nico loved her.

Will was definitely not his sister.

Right now Will was leading the way along the trail at a fairly brisk pace. If Nico had been expecting their walk to be relaxing, he was surely mistaken. By the time they reached the swimming hole his breathing had escalated and he had a strange feeling in his stomach he couldn't quite place.

The soft gurgling of water, along with the steady rush of the waterfall met his ears. Nico could see moonlight reflecting off the surface of the pool like glass.

Will sat down at the edge, like they had that morning. Nico joined him.

"Is that everything?" Will asked him, blue eyes searching Nico's face.

Nico looked away, fighting to catch his breath. "Everything?" Nico narrowed his eyes. "You think I'm lying?" Perhaps Will was more perceptive than Nico had realized.

Will looked down at his hands, which were folded on his lap. "I think you don't always tell the whole truth when you're trying to protect people."

"Look who's talking, Solace," Nico snapped back. "I seem to recall you being very secretive about your own dreams before we left on this quest."
"Yeah, well, that was a mistake," said Will. Nico could just make out the worry in his eyes before Will looked away.

Nico watched the side of Will's face in the moonlight. "You don't need to worry about me, Will. If you try to strangle me, I'll punch you."

"Suffocate," Will corrected. "In my dream I tried to suffocate you."

Nico had to fight to keep from laughing. Will noticed.

"It's not funny, Death Boy," Will muttered.

"Actually this whole conversation is a little ridiculous," Nico said. "No one is going to be strangling, suffocating, or beating anyone else up."

"But you're always threatening to beat me up."

"Yeah Blondie, but not when you're this pathetic."

Will grinned at him. "Resorting to name-calling again are you?"

"You started it."

Nico blinked as Will suddenly jumped up. "Where are you-,

He broke off as Will, without further ceremony, drew his shirt off over his head. Nico caught a brief glimpse of tan shoulders and stomach before he forced his eyes to the ground. He could feel his cheeks burning.

"What in Hades name are you doing, Solace?" Nico demanded, shocked. He refused to look up. "Wait, you're not going to jump in there are you?" Nico motioned towards the water. "It's nighttime."

"So?" said Will. "It's not like it's that dark out."

Nico was forced to agree with him. Between the stars, moonlight, and his increased night vision Nico could actually see pretty clearly. Nico wasn't sure that was a good thing right now.

"What's the matter?" Will asked with a crooked smile. "Can't swim?"

"Of course I can swim, Solace." Nico snapped nervously. Why did he feel like Will was trying to goad him into something?

" Didn't seem like it yesterday."

"I can swim!"

"Scared then?"

"No," Nico growled. "I just don't like to."

Will cocked his head to the side. "So you just like being a stick in the mud?"

Nico ground his teeth together. What was wrong with Will? Why was he being like this? Why couldn't the son of Apollo just behave himself and, oh, Nico didn't know, put his shirt back on?
Nico's embarrassment didn't last long though, because a second later he was splashed in the face as Will, still wearing his shorts (thank the Gods), dove straight into the blue waters.

"Solace," Nico groaned, wiping the water from his face. Nope. This walk was not going at all the way he'd imagined.

Will's head broke the surface of the water. He shook his head, blonde hair sending streams of water flying.

"Solace have you lost your mind?" Nico yelled, springing up. "I'm soaking wet!"

"So am I." Will smirked. "Come join me."

"Hell no," Nico snarled. "Get out you stupid friggin' moron!"

"Please?"

"No! You can't make me."

"Well I certainly won't make you," Will said, looking disappointed. Nico watched as Will took a deep breath and disappeared underwater.

Stupid idiot, Nico thought, although he wasn't sure if he was talking about Will or himself anymore. How had he ever thought this was a good idea?

He watched a couple of bubbles appear where Will's head had gone under.

The seconds were ticking by and still Will hadn't emerged again. Nico gritted his teeth. He wouldn't fall for this. Will was going to come up any second now…

Dammit, Will could hold his breath for a long time.

Something wasn't right.

With a surge of panic, Nico shed his jacket, kicked off his shoes, and dove straight in after his friend.

Lou Ellen had been right, the water was warm. It surrounded Nico, blotting out his hearing.

He needed to find Will, fast, before the idiot hurt himself-

Something touched Nico's arm. With a lurch, Nico kicked upwards, head breaking the surface of the water-

Nico stood up, spluttering. The water came up to his rib-cage. His clothes were completely soaked, plastered to his skin. Before him stood Will, a pleased grin plastered across his face. The expression faded and Will replaced it with one of mock-surprise.

"Oh no. I didn't make you do this, did I?" Will asked, eyes wide.

Nico glared at him for all he was worth, but even that wasn't enough to wipe the look off Will's face.

Nico splashed him in the face.

"Dammit, Will, that's not funny!" Nico shouted furiously. He was completely soaked. He swept his
hand over his face, trying to get the water out of his eyes.

Will seemed to disagree. He took one look at Nico's angry expression and burst out laughing.

How did he find this humorous? Nico cast his thoughts around searching for a way to wipe the look of delight off Will's face. Maybe he could summon zombies? Or open up the earth and have it swallow Will Solace whole? Will was clearly crazy though, so Nico was beginning to doubt whether even that would affect him…

Water hit Nico square in the face. He gasped, spitting it out of his mouth, realizing that Will had splashed him.

"What the hell Solace!" Nico muttered half-heartedly.

"Just trying to wipe that look off your face," Will answered. "You looked like you were overthinking this."

Nico didn't answer him, instead electing to simply stare dolefully at the son of Apollo.

"I can't believe that actually worked," Will continued, eyes twinkling. In the near-darkness, the flecks of gold among the blue seemed to stand out like miniscule pieces of sunlight. He realized suddenly that Will was very close to him. "You didn't really jump in thinking you had to save me did you?" Will murmured.

Nico shrugged. His heart still raced in his chest from his earlier scare. He took a deep breath, trying to steady it as Will stepped closer to him.

Nico wanted to take a step back himself, but he could feel he was already pressed up against the grassy banks of the shore. The only way to move away would be if he turned and actually climbed out.

It seemed a little juvenile.

Nico felt that feeling again, like butterflies were hatching in his stomach.

Will was close to him, closer than he'd ever been. Nico could feel the heat of his skin burning through his clothes. He was close enough for Nico to feel the tingle of his breath on his skin. Unbidden, a memory from Elysium sprung into Nico's mind, when Will had collapsed to the ground, lifeless and unbreathing, and Nico had desperately tried to give him CPR. For his own sanity, Nico had tried not to think about it afterwards, but now…

Now he found himself remembering, the warmth of Will's mouth pressed against his, the rush of his heartbeat pounding in his chest, and the gentle chill as snowflakes had begun to fall around them. That memory was almost entirely tainted by fear, though, and the poisonous sting of loss.

This time was different.

He could feel Will pressed against him, his mouth firm and warm on Nico's. Nico caught the vaguest taste of spearmint.

Somewhere in the back of Nico's thoughts, he was aware of Will's hands on his waist. Fire seemed to be spreading through him, igniting under the son of Apollo's touch. Not a painful fire like Will had described when he felt Apollo's power flood through him, but a gentle one that sent Nico's heart racing. Will's mouth felt both hard and soft on Nico's.
He felt Will press closer, his hands sliding up Nico's back.

Nico felt warmer than he'd ever been in his life, including the time he'd had to drink from the Phlegethon. He had no idea how much time was passing around them, and he didn't particularly care. The only thing he could feel was Will's skin pressed against his, Will's mouth moving on his. Nothing had ever felt so good in Nico's entire life. He was lost in this moment hoping it would never end.

But end it must.

At some point Will must have reached up, tangling a hand in Nico's hair. Nico felt his hand slide down to his neck now, and then a little farther towards his chest. It rested there for a moment.

Will broke away with a soft, unsteady breath, leaving Nico in a daze.

"What is this, Nico?"

Will's voice sounded distant, strange to Nico's ears. Nico didn't know what he was talking about.

"What?" he asked, almost hoarsely. He cleared his throat. Almost shyly, he looked into Will's face but saw that Will's eyes were trained on his shoulder. Looking down, Nico saw some sort of red mark on his collarbone, just above Will's hand. It disappeared under his shirt.

Leave it to Will to notice some random injury at a moment like this. Completely distracted from what had just happened, Nico grabbed the neck of his t-shirt and pulled it down to look, to show Will that it was just some minor cut or scrape or something.

"It's nothing, it's..." All words died in Nico's throat as he looked down at his shoulder.

A shape reminiscing a handprint had been scorched into his skin. Like he had been branded.

"What the-" Nico started, shocked. A split second later it clicked as he recalled how his skin had burned when the man in his dream had touched him. "Oh, Gods.." he choked out.

Will looked at him sharply, blue eyes clouded with confusion. "Nico? What the hell is that? I know that wasn't there when we left on this quest."

Nico gulped, mind going a thousand miles per hour. Somehow he knew Will wasn't going to let him bluff his way out this time.

"It's, um..." Nico took a deep breath. "It's from Tartarus."
Nico was right. Will was pissed.

"Will wait!" He heard Nico's shout behind him, but ignored it.

A thousand thoughts whirled through the son of Apollo's head as he stormed angrily up the path they had come down. This was not the way he had planned for this night to go… not that he'd planned anything at all. Had he expected to go for a swim? No. Had he planned on kissing Nico? Of course not! Well… he couldn't deny that he'd never not had the undeniable urge in the past, but that was beside the point. In the heat of the moment Nico had looked so perfect, soaking wet, his shirt clinging to him… Will had chosen to look past the blazing storm in his eyes and the heavy scowl that twisted his features. But Will always thought Nico looked perfect. He hadn't been able to help himself.

And then when Nico hadn't pulled away, Will had stepped closer, tracing his hands up Nico's back, feeling the heat of his skin…

"Will, stop!"

Will scrunched up his face. Why was he even thinking about this? Nico had lied to him.

And just like that Will felt furious all over again. Anger coursed through him, brought on by what Nico had told him. Or rather, everything Nico had not told him. Oh, by the way, I made a deal with Tartarus in the Labyrinth but no biggie, right? Also he likes to talk to me in my dreams now and burned his handprint into my shoulder, but whatevs.

Will gritted his teeth. How was it possible for anyone to be this infuriating?

"Solace!"

"What?" Will shouted, spinning around to glare at the dark haired boy.

Nico had been running after him, but now that Will's angry glare was upon him his step faltered and he stopped.

"Will, I'm sorry-,

Will cut him off. "Don't strain yourself."

Nico gaped at him. The expression was quickly replaced with one of annoyance as Will turned again and continued up towards the village. Nico followed, protesting angrily.

"What is your problem, Solace? Did you listen to anything I said? I was trying to protect you!"

"Yeah, you said that. A few times." Will took a deep breath, forcing himself to turn around again and face him. "How could you not say anything about this Nico? Tartarus forced you into owing him some kind of favor and you didn't think it important enough to tell me? What in Hades name were you thinking?"
Nico rubbed his hands over his face. His clothes still clung to his skin, dripping from when he'd jumped into the water after Will. "I- I didn't want you to worry about me," Nico finally told him. "Look, just… please don't tell Lou or Cecil. I don't want them getting worried too. I didn't tell you because I knew I could take care of myself-"

"You sure about that?" Will groaned. "Nico he branded your shoulder! That's not taking care of yourself! This is bad. He's clearly growing in power and he's made some sort of connection with you. How do you think it makes me feel, knowing that you were going through this and you didn't even trust me enough to tell me?"

"It's not because I didn't trust you," Nico shouted, eyes flashing. "I was trying protect you!"

"I don't need your protection, di Angelo," Will yelled back. "And I don't want it!" He couldn't stand the look of hurt on Nico's face, but was too made himself to do anything about it. Heck, Will had so many emotions boiling through him he couldn't decide where to begin to start telling the son of Hades off. First and foremost all Will could feel was simmering anger. Anger from how Nico had lied to him. Next he felt betrayal. Nico, the person Will trusted the most, hadn't had faith in Will that he could handle knowledge like this. The last bit he felt was his least favorite part. He felt shame. Shame because now Nico was just another in a long line of people who felt Will couldn't handle the truth.

This realization hit him like a blow in the gut.

"I didn't lie to you," Nico insisted.

"You did," Will stated firmly. "You lied by omission. You didn't think I could handle it."

Nico's breath caught sharply. "That's not true."

They had attracted a small crowd. Several passing Lotus Eaters glanced towards them with raised eyebrows and amusement in their gazes, like witnessing a couple of soaking-wet demigods screaming at each other might prove a great source of gossip.

"What's going on?" came a familiar voice.

Will groaned softly as Lou Ellen and Cecil appeared, clearly shocked and bewildered by their friends’ outburst. They looked back and forth between Will and Nico, unsure. Will had no idea what to tell them. Nico had asked him not to say anything to them. He doesn't deserve to ask that, Will thought, he doesn't have the right. We're all supposed to be in this together. Will couldn't help but glance over at the son of Hades again, who stood staring at them, eyebrows drawn together, eyes filled with uncertainty. Dammit Nico.

Why could he never seem to stay angry at the son of Hades for long?

Will sighed. "It's… nothing."

Lou Ellen stared at him. Will forced himself to take another deep breath. "Don't worry about it. Everything's fine."

Lou Ellen raised an eyebrow as she nodded. "Uh-huh. Oo-kay. Well, in any case I'm glad we found you two alive. Cecil and I woke up, saw your empty beds, and figured you might have decided to do something stupid. And it would appear now that we were right. Why are you guys all wet?"

"Um, I was teaching Nico how to swim."
Nico scowled at him, opened his mouth like he wanted to argue, paused, and then snapped it shut again. Will figured his brain small as it may be had finally caught up with him and made him realize he didn't really want to divulge what they'd been doing. Maybe he thought it would be embarrassing.

Well in that case...

"We were making out," Will said monotonously.

Everyone gaped at him.

Nico looked utterly horrified. His expression almost made Will smile.

"Umm, alright," Lou Ellen muttered. "That doesn't really explain why you guys are so mad at each other though..."

Cecil chuckled. "Unless it was that bad."

"You could say that," Nico muttered.

Suddenly Will didn't feel like smiling anymore. "Forget it. Let's just go find Aminta and see if she'll help us."

As it turned out they didn't find Aminta again until they were summoned to dinner. Just as she had that morning, she stood at the main table and silence fell around the clearing as she made introductions and discussed various activities.

Will didn't start paying attention until she cleared her throat and saw her eyes dart over to him and his friends.

"-but now onto more important matters," Aminta continued, green eyes unreadable. "As most of you are aware, merely miles from our shores a great event has begun to take place. Even as we speak the Pythian Games are about to begin and Python himself has taken up refuge within the halls of Delphi. He has graciously extended an invitation to us. After careful consideration, and nothing but the well-being of our people in mind, I have decided to accept this invitation."

Aminta's words were met with a wave of astonished murmuring.

"What?" Cecil whispered, eyes widening. "This can't be good."

"And who is going to be attending this request?" someone shouted, a sorrel-haired man with an exceptional amount of freckles. "You, Aminta? You intend to leave?"

"Relax, Geleon," Aminta said calmly, though her eyes flashed dangerously at his words. "I intend to ask for an audience with Python, to see where he stands with our people, nothing more. Never fear, I will return."

"How can you expect us to believe that?" asked a woman, younger with raven hair. "We know what your family is like."

Aminta appeared to choose her words carefully before she responded. "If we do not answer his invitation, Python could take it, at best, as disregard towards his power. At worst, and he could assume hostility. The latter of which is far more likely. Our island lays at the doorstep to his home. Like any sort of leader, he will want to extend his reach and unless we make allies with him, we could be the first to be crushed."
"Let him come," said Geleon. "We have survived here for centuries. We know how to defend ourselves."

"That may be true," Aminta permitted. "But he has many allies now, ones who may yet wish to defeat us. I must go there and determine who they are."

"You sound like your sister," Geleon growled. "She said something similar before she fled."

Aminta's expression turned to ice. "Do not ever compare me to my sister, Geleon. She was a traitor. She fled. I would fight for my people until my dying breath."

Eupolis stood up from his chair, briefly laying a hand on Aminta's shoulder. "Aminta is correct. If we can make an ally, avoid war, it will benefit us all. But should we have to fight, we must at least know what we are up against. I second her decision."

Eupolis's words were met with more chatter, but no one else seemed inclined to argue.

"Then it's settled," Aminta said gravely. "I will leave before first light."

Will looked over at Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil in stunned disbelief. "So… does this mean she's not going to help us? Should we be escaping right now, or something?"

Nico nodded pointedly, eyes fixed on something over Will's shoulder. He turned and found himself looking at Aminta, who had somehow escaped to their table.

"Demigods," she said in greeting, her eyes unreadable. "In light of what I just said, we have much to discuss. Please follow me."

Aminta led them back to the massive underground cavern they had first emerged from after they'd been knocked out. They took several turns through the passages, following the blonde woman until they reached a large hall. At the center sat a table, piled high with an assortment of items. Scrolls made from rolled up leaves, several laying open and covered in Greek, covered most of the table, but a pile of various weapons had been stacked at the other end.

"You can't side with Python," Will said, as she made her way to the table. "He's vile and horrible. And cruel," he added. He thought of Apollo, bound in chains, cold, alone, barely alive. Abandoned by the Gods. Will shuddered.

"I have not yet sided with anyone," Aminta said briskly. "I would never make such a rash decision."

"But-,

Aminta's eyes flashed with sudden anger. "I am trying to protect my people, my family, same as you. What would you prefer I do?"

Will gulped. Under the ferocity of her gaze he couldn't imagine anyone ever wanting to cross Aminta, but he couldn't deny that she had a point.

"Help us," Nico said bravely. "Give us weapons, tell us how to get inside. We will free Apollo and kill Python. Then you won't have to worry about him at all."

"And if you fail?" Aminta said tersely, standing straighter. "What if you were to get captured yourselves and Python were to discover we helped you?" She shook her head. "No, it is too dangerous. I will not risk the fate of my people on the capabilities of four children. No offense."
Lou Ellen looked crestfallen. "So you won't help us at all?"

Aminta raised an eyebrow. "I did not say that." She motioned to the weapons that lay before them. "These aren't our best quality, but you will have to make do. These are the few weapons we have that are unmarked with the symbol of the Lotus Eaters. Should you fall into the wrong hands, I do not wish for anyone to know that we supplied you weapons."

They moved closer to the table, looking over the weapons. Nico immediately grasped a sword similar in length to his old stygian iron one, while Lou Ellen grabbed a dagger.

Cecil chuckled as he lifted a huge axe experimentally. "Not really my style," he muttered, setting it back down. "I think I'll stick with a sword too."

They all looked at Will, who stood shifting awkwardly on his feet and grimacing at the weapons like he was terrified of them. Which he was. Unfortunately there were no bows to choose from.

"Will?" asked Lou Ellen.

Will grimaced. "It doesn't matter. You guys know I can't fight with any of this stuff."

Lou Ellen opened her mouth, probably to say something sympathetic, but Nico spoke first;

"Trust me, we know. But you should still grab something in case you need to defend yourself." The son of Hades grabbed one of the daggers from the table and flipped it in his hand, offering it hilt-first to Will. "This one's small. It'll help minimize your chances of hurting yourself."

Will shot him a glare as he took the dagger. Clearly Nico wasn't over their fight from before.

Well good. Will wasn't either.

Aminta had unrolled one of the scrolls, laying it flat upon the table. Peering closer Will saw it appeared to be a map of sorts. It looked exceptionally boring, nothing but natural landmarks, a stream or two, a road. "This is Mount Parnassus," Aminta informed them.

Lou Ellen alone looked astonished. "All of that? It looks like there's a whole town there, or even-,"

"A whole city," Aminta said. She smiled slyly at the other three demigods, whom all had looked at Lou Ellen in confusion, and slowly moved her hand over the paper. The image of the map shimmered under her palm, rewriting itself, growing more intricate and detailed.

"Trick of the mist," Aminta explained. "Mortals can go there and see nothing but ancient ruins, but to those who are adept at seeing through the mist… there lies an entire city."

Will leaned closer to understand what she meant. What had previously been a rather desolate looking mountain, now housed streets, buildings. Will saw a round shape that looked like it could be a coliseum.

"Woah," he muttered. Judging by the expressions on his friends faces Will assumed they were just as amazed. "So it's like Hogwarts!"

Aminta frowned and cocked her head to the side as she beheld him. "No. I do not believe there are any boil-infested pigs there." Moving on, she placed her finger on one of the roads. "This is the main entrance, though I daresay you four are looking for a more subtle display than stepping through the front gates."
"I can shadow-travel us there," Nico said immediately. "We won't be seen."

"Not if I kill you first," Will muttered. "Look you already got us to this island in the first place. And now that you have another... injury...," Will's eyes flickered down to his shoulder. He held up his hands. "All I'm saying is you seem to be taking a lot of risks lately..."

Nico narrowed his eyes at Will. "Like I said, just trying to help."

"Maybe you shouldn't try so hard," Will advised.

"You know what, Solace-,

"Could you two please stop fighting for just one second?" interrupted Lou Ellen. "I don't know what happened between you two, but we need to stick together. Especially considering how far we've come."

A short silence met her words. Will lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry. You're right Lou. We need to come up with a plan." He turned to Aminta. "Could you get us there? If you know so much about it..."

Aminta was already shaking her head before he could even finish. "Absolutely not. I have supplied you with weapons and a map of the city, but I can offer no more. Believe me, I do hope you succeed on your quest, but I will not put the fate of my people on the line for such a doubtful task."

Will sighed. As much as he hated to admit it, he could understand where she was coming from. In a way he admired the woman. She reminded him vaguely of the Roman praetor, Reyna. Will had only met her briefly after the battle, but he had seen her in action, strong, fearless, wise, a fearsome warrior. Will had never seen Aminta fight, but he was willing to bet she would prove a fearsome adversary to anyone who challenged her.

"Do you know where Python might be keeping Apollo?" asked Cecil, a deep frown upon his face.

Aminta shook her head. "Unfortunately, no."

Cecil tried again. "Will said it looked like he was being kept in a cell, in a dungeon or something."

"I have no idea where such a thing would be," said Aminta. "And I hardly think Python would be foolish enough to advertise that information. Wherever this dungeon is, it is more than likely somewhere known only to Python himself. He wouldn't want anyone to, say, attempt to break out a prisoner. He would keep it well guarded as well."

"Great," said Lou Ellen. "How are we ever gonna find Apollo now?"

The only one who didn't yet seem disheartened by the current state of affairs was Cecil. Will could see the wheels turning in his head as he stared at the map.

"Actually, that might work in our favor," Cecil said slowly. Will watched as his eyes slowly lit up, kindled with some bright idea. He didn't continue right away, instead chewing on his lip as he thought.

"How?" Nico asked, curiously.

Finally Cecil took a deep breath. "I think I might have an idea." He looked over at Aminta. "But we'll need your help. Although-," he added quickly, when Aminta opened her mouth to protest, "I think you will find it to yours and your peoples' benefits as well."
Aminta raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Oh? Let's hear it then."

With a look that suggested he was already regretting his idea, Cecil told them his plan.

A few hours later Will, Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil stood once more on the white sandy beaches upon which they had first arrived. Stars glistened above them, elusive and distant against the black sky.

After agreeing upon their plan Aminta had decided to leave promptly. Thirty yards or so down the shoreline a decent sized boat awaited, surrounded by a decent sized group of Lotus Eaters. Will saw a flash of Aminta's blonde hair under the noomlight as she spoke with one of them. The man from dinner, Geleon, Aminta had called him, was also part of the group to Will's surprise.

"Do you really think this plan is going to work?" asked Lou Ellen. "It seems really risky. We don't even know if Apollo is capable restoring his power himself. Zeus is the one who took his power so what if it takes Zeus to replace it?"

Will couldn't blame her for having doubts.

"It didn't take anyone to put the power in Will," Nico reminded them. "It found him itself. It should do the same for Apollo."

Farther down the shore Eupolis had broken free from the group and was making his way towards them.

"But the vial had to be broken for that to happen," Lou Ellen hissed. "How are we gonna get it out of Will?"

Will didn't particularly like this turn in the conversation. "No one is breaking me," he muttered.

"You should be ready to leave in a few minutes," Eupolis said as he reached them. "Aminta doesn't want delays. I'll see you off."

Nico looked surprised. "You're not coming?"

Eupolis shook his head. "Someone must remain behind to maintain order. Aminta has asked me to assume leadership here in her absence."

Cecil frowned. "I thought she said she wasn't the leader."

Eupolis rolled his eyes. "Yes, well, no one else seems brave enough to challenge her when she gets bossy. Well, if you all are ready, come along."

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil moved after him but Will didn't follow.

"Will, you coming?" Cecil asked, cocking his head to the side.

"Uh yeah," Will muttered. "I'll be right behind you. Just give me a minute."

"Alright," Cecil said slowly.

Nico's gaze lingered on Will for another couple of seconds, eyes narrowed, either with suspicion or worry, before he followed after the other two demigods.

Will wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to do with the minute he had asked for and found himself staring desolately out at the waves lapping over the sands.
There was a strange feeling in his stomach, a budding nervousness he hadn't felt so far on the quest. They had made it this far, been through the Underworld, survived the Labyrinth, escaped Morpheus and his brothers, all to reach Apollo before Python executed him…

Will swallowed thickly. They couldn't mess up now. If their plan went wrong…

"Will Solace."

A man's voice drew him from his thoughts and Will turned with a surprised gasp. He blinked at what he saw.

Behind him stood a man and woman. A girl, really.

The man had black hair, neatly trimmed to his shoulders, and piercing electric blue eyes. The girl who stood beside him appeared to be about thirteen or so with rich auburn hair pulled back into a ponytail. Reddish wisps cascaded around her face, drawing attention to her eyes, which were a luminous grey, almost silver.

Will relaxed slightly, seeing them. At least they weren't monsters. Even without the faint scent of ozone he would have known who they were.

It took him a minute to unstick his throat. "Lord Zeus," Will gasped. His eyes shifted to the girl. He had never met her before but he was fairly certain he knew who she was. "Lady Artemis. What, um, what are you doing here?" As he choked the words out Will realized this probably wasn't the best way to greet the king of the Gods. He knelt quickly.

Artemis's mouth twitched but Zeus's face remained as stormy as ever as he watched Will. Artemis took a step forward. "That is not necessary, Will. Please stand."

"Yes, Lady Artemis," Will muttered, nearly tripping as he stood up again. Unable to resist, he looked down the beach towards his friends departing backs, to see if they had noticed the appearance of the God and Goddess.

Artemis followed his gaze. "They cannot see us, Will."

"Oh." Will's pulse had quickened. He shifted nervously before re-asking his previous question. "What are you doing here?"

Artemis's gaze turned to stone. Will saw her cast her father a look from the corner of her eye, like she was waiting for him to do something.

Will also looked at him. Zeus had yet to say anything and Will did not like the look he was receiving from him, like… Judgment? Disappointment? He couldn't tell.

At last Zeus spoke. "I have come to reclaim what is mine."

Will's heart skipped a beat. Was Zeus serious? Did Will really understand what he was getting at? It seemed too good to be true. "You- you've come… for Apollo? You've come to help him?"

Zeus's eyebrows drew together. He and Artemis shared a look and Will noticed how her expression seemed to grow darker.

"No," Zeus said slowly. "I'm afraid nothing can help him now. It is risky for Artemis and myself to even come this close to that accursed mountain, but alas it was necessary."
"I don't understand," Will said. "Why was it necessary? What are you here to reclaim?"

Zeus's expression was unreadable. His eyes seemed to flicker darkly, like lightning in a storm. "I have come for my son's powers. I must see them returned safely to Olympus, where they will remain under my protection."

"Oh," Will said, shocked. "I, um, guess Jason told you about… what we think happened to Apollo's powers, then?"

Zeus inclined his head. "He did. And it seems you were correct. I can sense it within you."

"Oh," Will said again. He resisted the urge to scrunch his face up. Couldn't he remember how to speak properly? This is bad, he thought, this isn't supposed to happen. This could ruin their plan… "But you can't take his powers," Will gasped.

Zeus's eyes flashed dangerously. "I can and I-,

"Wait," Will yelped. "That's not what I meant! It's just that… we sort of came up with a plan, and we need Apollo's powers for it to work…"

Artemis shook her head. "Will you cannot bring Apollo's powers into that mountain. Python would seize them immediately."

"But…" Will thought desperately, trying to find some solution. "If Python is that strong how else will we rescue Apollo?"

"There is no hope for Apollo," Zeus snarled and Artemis winced.

"Father," she began, but Zeus cut her off.

"Do not start again," he warned her.

"How can you not do anything to help him?" Will demanded. To his horror he felt his eyes begin to prickle and he blinked. He was not about to start crying in front of Zeus and Artemis. "He's your son! Do you want him to die?"

A second later Will cringed, waiting for Zeus to smite him with lightning or something.

But nothing came.

When Zeus spoke again his voice was hushed and grating. "Do you not think this pains me, boy? Do you not think I wish there were another way? Do you not think I have exhausted every possibility in my mind?" Will stepped back as Zeus's voice rose almost to a shout. Above him, thunder seemed to rumble almost as loud. "Do you honestly think I wish to see my son dead at the hands of that monster?"

His words were meant with a ringing silence, broken only by the soft sound of crashing waves and rumble of thunder. It took Will a moment to speak again.

"No, I don't think that," he said softly. "But I don't understand…"

Zeus looked at him in disbelief. "How do you not understand? Have you been paying attention to anything around you? Are you that daft?"

Will looked down at the sand beneath his feet, as his vision blurred. Be angry, he pleaded to himself, get mad. Why couldn't he be like other demigods at times like this? Nico, Percy, Jason,
Annabeth… he had seen all of them stand up to Gods when they needed to, willing to face their wrath, unwilling to back down. But as soon as Zeus snapped at him, acted like he was a disappointment, he felt like he'd been kicked in the chest.

He was so sick of people acting like he was useless or stupid or weak.

"I don't understand why you can't go after Apollo," Will muttered slowly. "Surely, if you fought together, all of you, you could defeat Python. I've seen you do it before. Why won't you even go near the mountain?"

There was no answer to his question. Will looked up and saw Zeus and Artemis looking at each other, having some sort of silent discussion.

"Maybe," Artemis said quietly, "If we just told him about-,

"No," said Zeus. "I won't allow it. Not even the others know about it, so I certainly won't be explaining it to some mere child."

Artemis looked frustrated. "I just mean it could help him to understand. If Apollo's been able to speak with him then maybe there's still a chance to put a stop to this."

Will watched them critically. A thought occurred to him. "This has nothing to do with Python does it?" he said slowly. "This is about the keys Apollo mentioned. The keys to Tartarus's prison."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Zeus. "This has everything to do with Python." Zeus took a deep breath. "If what I've heard is true and Python really is searching for a way to unlock his cage…" Zeus trailed off looking troubled.

"It's all the more reason for us to go after Python," Will blurted out. "We need to stop him. If you won't do it for Apollo, do it to stop him from releasing Tartarus."

"It is because I am trying to stop him from freeing Tartarus that I will not rescue Apollo."

"Exactly-!" Will blinked. "Wait. What?"

Zeus closed his eyes and sighed, like he was resigning himself to a decision he knew he was going to regret. "If Python has made it his goal to free Tartarus, it is… prudent… that he does not get his hands on any more Olympians. I will not attack him because I cannot risk any of us getting captured."

"Why?" asked Will. "What does that have to do with releasing Tartarus?"

Zeus shook his head. "That is not your concern. If you wish to continue on your little quest and try to rescue Apollo yourself, be my guest. But first I need to take Apollo's power from you."

"But we need to bring Apollo his powers," Will exclaimed. "He can take them back and escape for himself."

Zeus frowned, pondering him.

Artemis turned and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps it is worth a shot to let them try. If Apollo can escape he can rejoin us and help us to fight Python. Maybe he could even defeat his old enemy. Besides, I am growing tired of sitting around, waiting to hear news of his death."

"We are not sitting around," Zeus said. "We will discuss it with the others in two days time."
"That may be too late," Artemis insisted. "I know this is also a risk, but please let these children try."

Will wasn't sure what they were talking about. So the Gods were planning on having a meeting to discuss what was going on? Well, that was all fine and well, and two days from now may have been soon enough to prevent Tartarus from rising, but it was certainly not soon enough to save Apollo.

Zeus raised an eyebrow. "I thought you thought your brother was annoying."

Artemis finally withdrew her hand from her father's arm, a deep frown on her face. "I do think he is annoying. But it would be even more annoying if he were to die a martyr and I had to listen to everyone cry about it for the next millennia. Besides, he may be annoying and irresponsible, but he does not deserve to perish like this."

Zeus remained silent for a moment before responding. "Very well. It is against my better judgment but I will allow you to keep Apollo's power with you for the time being. However, in an effort to prevent Python from recognizing it within you immediately, I am going to put a little protection around you."

Will nodded.

Zeus raised his hand and Will couldn't help but shut his eyes. He hoped it wouldn't hurt.

It didn't hurt but suddenly a wave of nausea twisted through his stomach. He tried to swallow it down but it wasn't enough and he fell onto his hands and knees. Just as he felt he was about to throw up all over the sand in front of the two Gods, the feeling passed.

"It is done," said Zeus.

"Python… won't know I have them?" Will choked out, pushing himself up on shaking legs.

"Hopefully not. You could say they are… dormant now, in a way."

Will took a deep breath. "Thank you. You know for everything. For trusting me."

Zeus nodded. "I hope I do not come to regret it, but… you are welcome."

Artemis smiled softly at Will, though it did not reach her eyes. "Good luck on your quest, Will. If anyone can save Apollo it will be you."

Will looked at her in surprise. He had never really met Artemis before now, but he had once heard Nico refer to her as, more or less, 'the Goddess of a bunch of man-haters who stole his sister'. Honestly, Will couldn't really see it.

By the time he opened his mouth to respond they were already gone.

Looking farther down the beach he could see people beginning to board the boat. He saw the familiar blonde hair of Aminta as she appeared to embrace someone in farewell.

It was time to leave.

As he walked down the beach towards them, Will couldn't help glancing out towards the horizon that dipped up above the dark waters, like the vastness might help him de-clutter his thoughts. He couldn't resist sending out one more message.
I'm on my way, dad.

Will highly doubted Apollo could hear him, but if there was even the slightest chance he could, Will hoped he might find some solace in the words.

It was time to go to Parnassus.

"Still hurling your meals overboard?"

Will rolled his eyes as Nico settled against the railing beside him.

"No," he sighed.

For the most part it was true. Will had been forced to conclude fairly quickly that boats didn't agree with him, though Nico and Lou Ellen seemed alright. Cecil seemed to be in the same boat though (no pun intended). More than a few times he and Cecil had found themselves running for the edge of the railing or the bathroom… whichever they found themselves closer to.

So far the trip had been rather uneventful (besides the whole hurling his meals overboard) which Will was grateful for. Their crew was small, consisting of the four demigods, Aminta, Geleon, and five or so other Lotus Eaters.

Before they left Aminta had said the trip from the island to the mountain would take a little over a day, which meant they should be arriving in only a couple hours or so.

So here Will was, peering over the side of the ship, waiting for the first welcoming sight of land.

"I'm not sure I like our plan," Will muttered. "What if Python just kills us on sight?"

Nico grimaced. "That seems unlikely. He wanted you to come here to witness Apollo's…" Nico's voice trailed off but Will was able to complete his sentence in his head.


Nico looked over at him. "Are you okay?"

Will wanted to laugh. "I'm not really sure how to answer that. I just feel like so much could go wrong. Zeus was right, what we're doing is super risky."

Nico's brow furrowed. Will had told his friends about Zeus and Artemis's appearance shortly after they set sail.

"All plans like this usually are." Nico looked down at his hands. Will followed his gaze, watching him twist the skull ring on his finger. It was a nervous habit with the son of Hades, Will knew. Whatever Nico was thinking about, it had him worried. "Look, I have to ask… are you still mad at me?"

Will looked at Nico for a moment. He found his eyes drawn to the way his dark hair blew in the wind and noticed Nico wince as a piece struck his eye. Almost without thinking Will reached out and pushed it aside. Nico froze at the contact, but relaxed a second later.

"I don't think so." Will quickly withdrew his hand, willing himself not to blush. "You're not easy to stay mad at."

Nico raised an eyebrow. "Really? I've heard… pretty much the opposite."
"I'm not happy about it, but... I get why you did it," Will said. "I probably would have done the same in your place."

Nico looked at him sharply, like what Will had said took him by surprise. Will didn't see why.

"You would?" Nico asked, disbelief coloring his words.

Will had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. "No offense, Nico but you can be really oblivious about certain things."


Will really didn't want to start a fight right now. "Just that... well, remember what happened before?"

"Before what?"

Will fidgeted nervously. "The fighting."

"Before the fighting..." Nico repeated looking confused. A second later his eyes widened and he turned red. Will watched him look away hurriedly, which Will was grateful for. He could feel himself turning red too.

"Why did you do it?" Nico asked after a moment, so quietly that Will almost missed it entirely.

"What sort of question is that?" Will asked. He wasn't even sure how to respond to it. "I guess... it just seemed like the thing to do at the time."

Nico seemed to be holding his breath. He blew it out all at once. "Oh."

Did he sound almost... disappointed? Will wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of a lot of things anymore.

Nico looked down and began twisting his ring once again.

"I meant what I said, Nico," Will told him seriously. "Look, I don't know what's going to happen once we get in there but I don't want you getting hurt. I don't want any of you to get hurt." Will looked over to where Lou Ellen and Cecil were speaking with Aminta on the other side of the boat. Will took a deep breath. "This deal with Tartarus, it can't be a good thing. You have no idea what this favor is, and with all this stuff going on about Python trying to free him... I'm scared of what he might ask you for. So just promise me... for once in your life would you please take care of yourself?"

Nico was glaring at him again, and Will waited for him to get angry.


Will wasn't willing to take any chances though. He shook his head. "Not good enough. If it comes down to you or me... I want you to swear you'll take care of yourself."

Nico scowled. "You're ridiculous, Solace. But fine, I swear I'll take care of myself."

"On the river Styx?"

Nico gaped at him. "Are you out of your mind, Solace?!

"Not as much as you are, clearly!" Will yelled. Okay, so maybe he was still a little angry with
Nico. "If you're making deals with Tartarus clearly you can't seem to take care of yourself! If you don't... I- I won't let you go in there with me!"

Nico raised an eyebrow. "Like you could stop me," he muttered. He looked sharply at Will, eyeing him for a few seconds, before he sighed. "Very well. If it makes you feel so much better... I swear on the river Styx to take take care of myself before you. There. Happy?"

Happy wasn't really the right word, but maybe... relived. At least now Will didn't have to worry about Nico pulling stupid stunts like this again. He was sort of surprised though; Nico had agreed to Will's request exceedingly quickly.

"Yes," Will said.

Nico scowled. "You're so strange, Sol-," His eyes focused on something past Will in the direction the boat was moving, and the words died in his throat. Will followed his gaze and gasped.

Far in the distance, materializing from the midst of thick fog and clouds, Will could see a huge shape rising from the earth. Will's breath caught in his throat.

The mountain.

They were there.

"It's... huge," Will breathed. His heart pounded in his chest and he suddenly felt a little light-headed. He had known where they were going for almost a week now but somehow the sight of the mountain looming before them made it seem all too real. He wanted to vomit overboard again.

"There it is."

Aminta, Lou Ellen, and Cecil had arrived beside Will and Nico. Nico, Lou Ellen and Cecil all appeared equally astonished, but Aminta's face was impassive.

"We're actually here," Lou Ellen whispered. "This is it."

"You know, now that I'm thinking about it my plan doesn't seem all that great," Cecil said hollowly.

Aminta crossed her arms. "Yes, we are here. I'll ask you all one more time; are you sure you want to do this? This is your last chance to back out."

The rest of Aminta's people circled around them, curiously. They all knew the plan. Will felt shaky. He looked over to meet Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil's eyes, one at a time. He could see the worry there, but also the defiance and determination.

He took a deep breath. "No. We're ready. Let's do it." Then he couldn't help but add, "Besides where would we go if we backed out now?"

Aminta raised an eyebrow as she eyed him. A sly smile passed over her mouth, but it was far from comforting. "Good point. She looked over, meeting the eyes of her own people. "You know what to do."

Before Will could react, he felt a familiar sting in his neck, and gasped out. He recognized the feeling immediately. Or rather, the lack of feeling; numbness was spreading through his limbs.

He collapsed to the ground. Beside him he heard Cecil gasp as well, and soft hissed of pain from
Lou Ellen and Nico. The same thing seemed to have happened to them. However this time he didn't black out, though the idea seemed welcoming. "You- you," he croaked out, clasping his hand to his neck. His muscles seemed to be working against him.

Aminta regarded him coldly. "That was just a low dose. I'm sorry, Will. I'm sorry to all of you. But I will not fail my people." She motioned sharply to her men. "Bind their hands and gag them."

"How could you do this-," Lou Ellen gasped. "We t-trusted you!" She seemed to be having difficulty speaking.

Aminta's face was dead and unreadable, emotionless. "Save it for someone who cares," she growled. "We are almost to the shore. When we arrive, I expect you to behave yourselves. It is useless to fight, you are outnumbered."

Will gritted his teeth as a rag was shove roughly into his mouth. There was nothing else to do. He struggled helplessly as the boat lurched to a halt, nearly making him lose his balance with his hands tied behind his back.

"Now then," Aminta said, turning away from them as they were each dragged to their feet. "Let's take them to Python."
To say they made an entrance would be the understatement of a very loud, very angry, overstated statement.

As the four demigods were ushered through the pearly-white gates (okay, it was more like a massive crumbling stone archway with various Greek deities carved into the grey rockwork), Nico had to fight off the semi-psychotic urge to laugh. His three friends had certainly risen to the task at hand.

"Let go of me, you dodo-loving-dimwit!" Lou Ellen shrieked, ferociously wiggling away from the man who gripped her arm. He glared at her.

Will managed to break free of Geleon for a brief moment and screamed, "I scorn you, scurvy companions!" He was promptly tackled by Geleon.

Nico raised his eyebrows. So apparently Blondie had decided to quote Shakespeare.

Cecil, meanwhile, had flung himself to the ground and was being dragged by his foot through the dirt, hands scrabbling desperately like he wanted to claw his way back out the gate.

"Noooooooono…!" The two Lotus Eater girls dragging him looked disgusted.

Nico and Aminta shared a look, poker-faced.

Don't you fucking dare, she seemed to say. Nico shrugged, allowing her to shove him along.

After arriving on shore, Aminta and her comrades had wasted no time in hauling the four demigods along the docks, much to the astonishment of a group of pretty teenage girls whom sat on the edge of the water, reapplying lipstick and inspecting their lacquered nails. They eyed the demigods as they approached and Nico saw them raise their chins, sniffing. When they bared their teeth, sharp fangs glinted in the early afternoon sunlight.

Dracaena.

One of them, a raven-haired girl with blue eyes, temporarily ceased her hissing in favor of eyeing Will up and down appreciatively. Nico wished he wasn't a hostage so he could chop her head off.

The girls didn't attack though, nor did they seem threatened by the demigod's sudden appearance. Instead they hung back and watched curiously as the kids were ushered forwards by their captors.

The ascent to the mountain proved steep.

They found themselves upon an ancient cobbled pathway which ran up the mountainside in jarring switchbacks which quickly had Nico and the others gasping for breath. They passed several groups of mortals whom looked at the captive demigods with their mouths agape.

Nico's legs were on fire by the time they reached the huge rock archway. Amidst the crumbling
stone he could just make out the shapes of women, their bodies twisting along the cold frame, their faces indiscernible.

Nico counted nine total.

The nine muses. Front and center at the peak of the arch was, he assumed, Calliope, the famous harbinger of poetry.

"This is where the mortal-tourist-trap ends and the Forgotten City begins," Aminta said in a hushed voice, just loudly enough for the demigod's to hear. "Prepare yourselves."

Nico wished he knew what to prepare for. His hand twitched, bound behind his back. He longed for his sword.

With the blink of an eye, almost as soon as he stepped through the structure, the world seemed to shimmer like a mirage before his eyes. Behind him he heard Lou Ellen's breath catch.

More mist, Nico thought. The mist was so thick here even he, a demigod, was having trouble seeing what lay below the surface. Trying to steady both his breathing and pounding heart, Nico took a deep breath and focused. It took a few seconds and no small amount of effort, but eventually his vision cleared.

What he saw was beyond anything he could have imagined.

The first thing he noticed were the tents. Dozens upon dozens, perhaps even hundreds, lined the street. They were all of various shapes, sizes, designs, and all set up in narrow rows along the street wherever they could fit between the rocks and trees. The place smelled of a strange combination of barbecue, monster sweat, crisp pine needles, and fresh mountain air.

The second thing Nico noticed were the monsters. Within, without, and all around there were… things. With a jolt, Nico realized that the dracaena girls had just been the tip of the iceberg. Python's reign had pulled in a whole array of malevolent guests.

They passed by another group of fanged teenagers, who also appeared to be dracaena, although there were a couple of guys among this group. Nico stared at one of them. He had never seen a male dracaena before. Honestly he hadn't even thought they existed but now that he thought about it he supposed it made sense. He found himself gazing at his gold hair and light eyes. It took him longer than it should have for him to finally pull his gaze away. Looking to the right Nico saw what looked like a hydra family going for an afternoon stroll. Two large ones followed behind a little hydra, which was shredding a giant powdery donut between the razor-blade teeth of its two heads. To his left a couple of harpies shrieked and clawed at each other, fighting over some piece of glittering jewelry. Feathers rained down to the dirt beneath them.

And the farther they walked the more Nico saw.

They passed ghosts, a herd of centaurs, a cluster of what appeared to be telekhines, and what Nico could only describe as a pygmy-giant. A flock of stymphalion birds circled overhead.

Nico had to force his mouth shut.

They appeared to have entered some sort of monster campground.

Nico felt Aminta press closer, jerking him back against her roughly so she could whisper in his ear; "They must all be guests of Python's. The Games have been a source of entertainment for ages. Of course usually they are for patrons of Apollo. These ones are here to celebrate his imminent fall."
Nico felt sick. "Is it like this all the way to the top?" he breathed back.

He couldn't see Aminta's face, but her breath was harsh on the back of his neck. "I do not think so. The farther we go the more it will start to look like a city with actual buildings. My sister and I came here once when I was a child. I do not remember it that clearly but I remember there being shops, restaurants, hotels, that sort of stuff. I imagine those we see down here are the least important guests. The ones Python values most, the more powerful, will be closer to the top, as that is where the real excitement happens."

Great, Nico thought, all these monsters and it turns out they're actually the weakest of the bunch.

They continued onward, climbing higher. Nico couldn't deny the view was spectacular. The expanse of the ocean lay across one horizon, blue and vast as far as the eye could see, while sprawling green fields and civilization took up another portion. Nico shivered. Was this how the mortal world looked to Gods? Miniscule and irrelevant, ready to be crushed underfoot?

He sincerely hoped not.

Python may not have been a god but Nico could understand how he could become so powerful up here. It did not help knowing that this place had once belonged to Apollo, God of the Sun and Python's enemy. Seeing it now, overrun by monsters, made Nico's heart heavy.

It was hard to believe that somewhere on this Gods-forsaken mountain, Apollo awaited his death in the dark. They were so close.

Nico looked around as best he could to see Will's face, but the son of Apollo was looking away from him, towards something in the distance.

Nico followed his gaze and saw another huge stone ruin down the hillside. The pillars had crumbled free and fallen to the ground over the years, breaking apart across the grass. It appeared nature had tried to reclaim most of the structure, caking the old marble with moss and filth. A group of monsters were gathered to one side, gawking towards the ruins as well. One of them raised a disposable camera to snap a picture at something.

None of that was what caught Nico's attention though. It was what was inside.

In the midst of the ruins lay a dragon.

She was relatively small for her size (this was comparing it to Festus- the only dragon Nico had ever seen), her red and brown scaled hide glowing dimly in the cool sunlight. A rusting metal collar encircled her neck.

"Delphyne," Nico heard Will whisper softly behind him.

Delphyne. Nico scoured his brain, searching for a description to accompany the name. Delphine, the Guardian of the Oracle.

Nico felt ice in the pit of his stomach. He didn't need to hear the abject horror in Will's voice to understand the implications.

One of the dragon's wings was held at an odd angle, like she had been injured. Nico wasn't an expert of dragon anatomy but judging by the crooked angle of the bones it looked like it had been broken. The nearly imperceptible glimmer of metal around her feet caught Nico's attention too.

She could neither walk nor fly.
Rage kindled in Nico's chest at the thought. He had no way of knowing exactly what Will was thinking right then, but he wished he could find a way to assure him they would help Delphyne. Part of him wanted to break free there and then, sprint to the beast, and free her just so he never had to hear that pain in Will's voice again. But he couldn't.

Not yet.

As the demigod's passed, the dragon lifted her head slowly to look at them. Her eyes were a muted gold like burning wheat, and contained an ancient sorrow the likes of which Nico had never seen before. She seemed to look at Will mostly, like he was an odd apparition of the times she used to know.

You should never have come.

Nico shuddered. Still being pushed forward by Aminta, he turned to look back the way they had come. The crowds of monsters they'd passed were closing in behind them, staring after the demigods in contempt and amusement.

There was no escape now.

The higher they climbed the colder it became, winds picking up in the high altitudes, and Nico began to shiver. Soon they began to see more architecture like Aminta had described. They entered a split in the rocks in the side of the mountain, not unlike a small tunnel. When they emerged again their surroundings were entirely different.

The road was still cobbled and cracked, but now they were completely closed in. On all sides doors and windows had been carved into the mountainside, souvenir shops, homes, diners, marketplaces, all busy and bustling with monsters. If Nico wasn't mistaken some of them even looked like mortals who must have accidentally wandered in. The mist must have been so thick they had no idea what they were truly surrounded by. This all continued as far as Nico could see, circling up the mountainside. It was exactly as Aminta had described; an entire city, cloaked in mist since ancient times, and carved into the side of the mountain.

It made Nico's head spin.

A man with sharp teeth and four arms lurched into their path.

"Apollo's child," he shrieked, pointing wildly at Will. "Come to see daddy bite the dust?" Then he spat at Will's feet.

Nico saw red.

Luckily for the man, Aminta was sharp and was already tightening her grip on the son of Hades before he managed to tear free and throttle the monster with his bare hands.

Four-hands watched as Nico struggled against her, a sadistic leer written across his face. Nico was relieved when Aminta finally drew her own sword, forcing the monster out of their path. Will looked shaken.

Their plan may have been a horrible mistake, Nico realized in daze. They had wanted Python to know they had arrived, but had not fully understood what they were walking into in doing so.

The monsters around the square seemed to be growing braver as they overcame their surprise, and many of them were eyeing the demigods- particularly Will- with hostility.
"Back off," Aminta snarled, brandishing her sword at a Kobaloi who got worrisomely close. "These Half-Bloods are to be delivered to Python himself. They are important to him."

Nico heard the ring of steel and knew that the rest of her comrades had also drawn their weapons. Around them the monsters hissed and bared their fangs, drawing in like a bloodthirsty crowd.

Nico's heart pounded in his chest. His palms were sweaty. He wasn't sure how much longer the monsters would heed Aminta's words and should they attack they were vastly outnumbered, unarmed, and their hands bound.

"Is that so?"

Everyone in the road turned to look in the direction of the voice, which had cut through the noise like steel. A man, tall and lean, with plenty of muscle rippling under his t-shirt was making his way towards them, sword in hand. An intense scowl splayed across his face, twisted by the presence of numerous scars carved into his skin. A dozen or so others flanked behind him, some armed with swords, some crossbows. They were all trained on the newcomers.

"Drop your weapons," the man ordered. "Or the only people you'll be meeting are the judges of the Underworld."

Aminta looked at him, eyes dark and fierce. "I will do no such thing. Who are you?"

The man proudly raised his chin. "Lieutenant Hybris. Head of Parnassus Security, appointed by Lord Python himself."

Nico raised an eyebrow at that. Hybris... the infamous legacy of Ares, for whom hubris was named after? He didn't like the sound of that at all. How many others had had the chance to be resurrected before Gaia's fall?

Hybris leveled his sword at them. "Now I repeat; drop your weapons. It's nothing personal. Unless you are participating in the games, there are no weapons permitted in Delphi. That goes for all of Lord Python's guests."

The Lotus Eaters shifted nervously, waiting for Aminta's command. Nico could tell she was loathe to obey, but there didn't appear to be another option. She took a deep breath and nodded her head once.

Nico heard the clangs of metal hitting the pavement behind them.

Aminta reluctantly shifted her grip on her own blade, offering it to Hybris. He took it with a pleased grin, revealing yellow, broken teeth. "That wasn't' so hard now, was it? Who are you and why have you brought these prisoners with you?"

Aminta raised her head. "My name is Aminta. I represent the Eastern Tribe of the Lotus Eaters. These-," she shook Nico slightly, "-half-bloods- attempted to sneak into my homeland. They are our gifts to... Lord Python."

Hybris thought about that for a moment. "I see. Well your arrival seems to have caused quite a stir, and Lord Python does not appreciate his guests causing trouble. In any case, Python is a busy man. Your request to see him will have to wait. I will take these prisoners with me, to be taken care of how I see fit."

Aminta growled softly under her breath. "These prisoners are very important to Lord Python. Believe me, he will want to see them immediately. As trustworthy as I am sure you are, I am loathe
to let them out of my sight until I know he has received them."

Hybris's lip curled like he was growing annoyed with her. "Very well. For your sake I hope you are correct. Python gets most displeased when his work is disturbed for foolish requests. Trust me, you don't want to know what he does with those who displease him. Come with me."

With those final words, he turned, and they followed him deep into the city, onwards and upwards through the winding streets.

Nico had no idea how long they walked, but he wasn't sure how much more he could take; his legs burned, his lungs seared, and he could practically feel his blood pressure skyrocketing from sheer stress.

Just as he thought his legs were going to collapse under him, they rounded one last corner and found themselves at the front of a beautiful garden area.

Laurel trees bordered the walkway, leaves rustling in the breeze. Purple hyacinth flowers sprouted from the soft grass, permeating the air with a pungent floral scent. On the far side of the grounds a massive set of golden doors gleamed under the skies, built into the mountainside.

Nico's breath caught.

On the right side of the doors the images of a lyre and laurel wreath had been etched into the stone, on the other, the God himself; Apollo. It might once have been an impressive replica of him, but sadly it appeared that the depiction of Apollo had been smashed to bits, leaving chunks of stone strewn across the lawn.

Nico's stomach had twisted itself into knots. If Python was anywhere in the world, this was surely the place. Nico couldn't resist sending up a quick prayer to the gods, hoping against hope that their plan would succeed. Now that they were here it seemed reckless and desperate. Doubt gnawed at him. They should have thought it through more, come up with a plan B.

Nico knew such thoughts were useless though; the time for planning was over. They were out of time.

"I sincerely hope you are ready to meet your new master, Child of Apollo," Hybris sneered at Will.

Will's bright blue eyes were wide and frightened. He looked slightly green. Lou Ellen and Cecil looked no better.

Without further celebration Hybris shoved the golden doors open and led the way into the hall.

And Nico finally got his first good look at Python.

Jason

Three hours ago.

"That's great Paolo," said Jason. "Now just- AAGGKKK! No, not like that! You'll chop your arms off!" Jason screamed and ducked as a sword flew over his head. "Oh Gods, just stop. Everyone stop!"

Jason collapsed onto the ground, with a groan. A second later he pushed himself back up because the snow was starting to seep through his jacket. Snow in June. And here he'd been so excited to spend the summer relaxing at camp, basking in the sun, swimming with Piper in the lake, looking
forward to the upcoming firework show on the beach with his friends…

Instead it was freezing and he was stuck teaching remedial swordsmanship lessons to all the campers who desperately needed them.

"We're done for the day," he called, pushing himself up.

An Aphrodite girl blinked. "But shouldn't we end on a positive note?"

Jason shrugged. "No one's died yet so that's pretty positive. Besides the weather looks like its about to get nasty."

They all looked to the sky.

Black clouds spiraled overhead, flickering dully with forks of lightning. Jason saw a flash, accompanied by a low rumble a few seconds later.

"But it won't come inside the camp," said Katie Gardner. "It'll pass over us."

What she said was true, but Jason could hear the doubt in her voice. Foul weather was never supposed to be able to reach within Camp Half-Blood because of the protective boundaries. But then again, an unnatural frost was already sticking to the ground, chilling everything within reach. Annabeth had looked up the weather forecast on her laptop a couple of days ago, and it was safe to say the cold seemed to be expanding. Most of North America appeared to be experiencing a bizarre drop in temperatures over the course of the past week.

Jason wasn't sure about the rest of the globe but he had a instinctively bad feeling.

Another tongue of lightning, crackling and violent, rattled through Jason's bones. If it felt like that to him, he couldn't imagine how it felt to the rest of the campers.

Jason shivered as the first icy drops of rain splattered against his arms. "Somehow I don't think it's going to pass over this time," Jason said evenly, tearing his gaze away from the flickering sky. "We should all get inside."

Nico

Python was nothing like Nico had expected. Actually he wasn't really sure what he'd been expecting, but this… wasn't it. Python. Perhaps a snake's face? Red eyes? Fangs? An unhingeable jaw allowing him to swallow his enemies whole?

Or maybe even Lord Voldemort. (Oh Gods, Blondie was rubbing off on him…)

But the man before him was tall, remarkably slender, with skin like skim milk, and venom-green eyes. His head was as smooth and hairless as a baby's backside (not that Nico had ever seen a baby's backside and he hoped he never would). He could see the bluish tracks of veins under Python's papery flesh, like a little terrifying, galaxy of blood.

Python could have been Slenderman's evil twin. Just not as tall. There were others in the room as well, about fifteen people total not including any of the newcomers, but Nico didn't care much about them.

The room itself appeared to be some sort of throne room, although it was in a state of disarray. Empty pedestals lined the walls. Nico had a feeling that marble busts should have topped them, but had been removed. He could guess why. A large throne resided in the center of the hall, which
Python was lounging in when they entered. The gold craftsmanship was engraved with a pair of bows aimed inwards toward each other, and a raven flying through the center. The throne was the only thing Python appeared to have left entirely intact.

Nico's skin crawled as Python heavy-lidded gaze fell upon them.

Hybris kneeled before him, bowing his head. "My Lord. These… people… were caught trying to smuggle weapons into your home. I would have handled them myself but they claimed to have important business with you."

Python raised a hairless eyebrow. "Is that so?" His voice was soft and oddly smooth sounding.

His poisonous gaze transitioned leisurely between the Lotus Eaters, resting briefly on Aminta, before continuing on to the demigods. Lou Ellen and Cecil fidgeted under his gaze. Nico fought the urge to look at the floor as his scum-green eyes settled upon him. When his gaze settled finally upon Will, it remained there.

"Yes," Python said softly. "I have been expecting these children."

He didn't seem inclined to say anything else.

Hybris stood up and glared at the newcomers. "I advise you show some respect and bow."

Aminta was the first to move after a hesitation. She knelt slowly, keeping her eyes fixed on Python as long as possible before she dipped her head. Her companions followed suit. Nico's heart fluttered. He knew they could no longer count on her for protection.

That was their agreement after all: get them into Parnassus alive and deliver them to Python as their prisoners. Then they would go their separate ways.

When none of the demigods moved to bow down to Python, Hybris strode over to Will. "I told you to bow," he snarled under his breath.

Nico stomach jumped as Hybris planted his foot in the back of Will's leg, forcing the son of Apollo onto his knees.

Anger bubbled through Nico, but he, Lou Ellen, and Cecil all quickly knelt as well, unwilling to give Hybris a chance to do the same to them.

The faintest of smirks twisted at the side of Python's mouth as he watched this unfold. "Now that wasn't so hard was it?" he commented quietly.

Nico noted uneasily that Python's attention was still focused on Will, his head tilted to one side, watching the son of Apollo as if almost fascinated. Finally he let out a sigh and stood up from his… no, Apollo's chair.

"You know it gladdens me that you chose to attend, William. Believe it or not, I am very proud of you- it must have taken no small amount of courage for you to come all this way from that paltry camp of yours. So many demigods these days lack the fortitude necessary for any sort of remarkable feat. I'd like you to rest assured that your father will surely find some comfort in the fact that not all of his family has forsaken him in his final days."

Will glared at the man in front of him. "Apollo's not going to die. I won't let you kill him. I won't let you hurt him. Never again." Will spat the words out through gritted teeth. Nico was startled by the look of hatred upon his friend's face.
A soft rasp rose up in Python's throat. Nico thought it could have been a laugh. "Don't you worry. I have already hurt him all I intend to. He was very useful, you know. He was defiant at first, understandable of course, but I am quite persuasive. I had him talking in the end. He told me a many fascinating secrets about his family."

A shard of ice seemed to have imbedded itself in Nico's throat. A few days ago Apollo had told them he'd lied to Python about the keys... whatever that meant. Was it possible Python had managed to wrench more out of him since then?

"How dare you," Lou Ellen snarled, hazel eyes blazing as she looked at him like he was, well, some sort of snake in the grass. "Torturing him like this. You may be strong now, but we all know the Gods hold powerful grudges. Zeus will find you. He'll destroy you."

Python tapped a thin finger thoughtfully on his chin. "Funny. I don't see Zeus anywhere near here. In fact… a little snake told me he was seen just a day or so ago, speaking to you upon an island, warning you to turn back. In fact, I do believe it was the same island that dear Aminta here claimed you to have snuck onto."

Nico's mind was reeling. Python knew Zeus had spoken to Will before they boarded the boat? Had Aminta betrayed them? It didn't seem likely, heck, he didn't want to believe it, but Nico already knew one Lotus Eater who was a remarkable liar...

Aminta's eyes narrowed as she looked over to Will. She spoke with honest surprise. "You spoke to Zeus before we left my island? You did not tell me this."

Nico had to take a moment after that to thank the Gods Will was smart enough to not say anything that could ruin their disguise.

"You took us prisoner!" Will exclaimed, looking a little too furious. At least he wasn't still trying to quote Shakespeare… "Why would I tell you anything?"

Nico watched with narrowed eyes. This had become exceedingly dangerous. Aminta had agreed to help get them into Parnassus as prisoners, but if she thought they were actually keeping things from her...

Nico needed to figure out quickly if she was actually on their side or if she was simply another double agent like her sister. He glared at her and said, "Don't play games. You're working with Python aren't you? Who else could have told him Will spoke to Zeus?"

Aminta looked annoyed. "I have never spoken to Lord Python before now. You four snuck into my territory." She looked steadfastly at Python. "That is all I know."

Nico frowned at that. Okay, so she was clearly being cautious but he figured if she was actually working for Python she wouldn't be playing dumb in front of him.

For now Nico was inclined to believe what she said. But then who...

"It was me."

Nico looked in surprise over to the far wall, where an unfamiliar man stood, staring intently at Aminta. Nico saw the blonde woman look back at him with a confused frown.

"Who on earth are you?" Aminta demanded staunchly. "I've never seen your face before. Why were you spying on my island?"
The man smiled slightly, almost sadly "I'm not surprised you don't recognize me after so long. You have seen my face before, just… not this one. Perhaps this will help."

Nico watched in astonishment as the air shimmered and the man grew shorter, his hair lengthening and lightening, his face becoming more angular. More mist, Nico thought in disbelief. He was so surrounded by mist in this city that he wasn't surprised he hadn't noticed before.

But now Nico it was only too easy to recognize the woman who now stood before them.

Apparently Aminta recognized her as well.

"Agnete," she whispered, green eyes wide and astonished, all traces of anger gone. "You're alive? I heard but I'm not sure I truly believed."

"Of course I am alive, sister," Agnete said quietly. For the first time in his life, Nico didn't see any sort of facade masking her emotions. "It takes a little more than a sentence of exile to kill me."

Now that Nico could see the sisters together, their resemblance was striking. They both shared the same long blonde hair, slender frame, and fierce green eyes, though Aminta's were features were more readable, less guarded than her sister's.

"You-," Aminta faltered as though she were trying to organize her thoughts. "You've been watching us? Keeping tabs on our home?"

Agnete met her sister's eyes, ever cautious. After a second her expression softened and she smiled again. "Of course I have been keeping an eye on you. You are my sister, my family. I understand you may feel differently towards me, but I could never abandon you. Or my people. I never will."

Aminta swallowed. "I understand." She looked quickly over to the demigods and seemed to refocus like she'd remembered their mission. "Did you know these half-bloods tried to sneak into our village?"

"I did. Actually…" Agnete took a moment to finish. "…I sent them."

It took Aminta perhaps a half-second too long to force a look of surprise onto her face. "You did?!"

Agnete raised an eyebrow. "You did not know this?" she said carefully.

Aminta shook her head hurriedly. "That is what these children said, but I did not believe it. It sounded too absurd."

Agnete nodded slowly, eyes locked on her sister. "I see." She let out a breath. "Well, you did not disappoint me. You acted exactly as I expected you would. You did well bringing these children to Lord Python."

Nico watched them with baited breath. It was like watching two ticking bombs trying to get their stories in sync with each other before it all blew up in everyone's faces. Aminta may have brought them here, helped them, but they had also thought Agnete was trying to help them. Nico had no idea whose story to buy anymore.

Hopefully Python wouldn't see through it either, especially since Agnete had apparently allied herself with him now after the Oneroi's defeat. Scratch quadruple agent, Nico thought. She was what now… a quintuple agent? Was that even a thing? She certainly got around.

Agente moved closer to her sister, speaking to Python. "It is as I said, you have our allegiance. You
have our people's allegiance."

Python raised an eyebrow at Agnete, mouth twisting. "You cannot promise that, Agnete. Your people cast you out, abandoned you. You, your promises, and your allegiance mean nothing to them."

Agnete froze, mouth open.

A few seconds passed while Aminta looked hard at her sister. Finally she cleared her throat. "I can. They respect me. They will follow me."

Aminta gave the demigods one final, sad look before she took a deep breath.

Then she knelt down upon the marble floor once more.

"I, Aminta, Daughter of Cybele and Leader of the Eastern Lotus Tribe, pledge my allegiance to you, Lord Python, ruler of Delphi. Your wish is my command."

It was quite a declaration.

It was also horrifying. Looking over to meet Will, Lou Ellen's, and Cecil's stricken gazes was enough to confirm they felt the same as Nico. While they had known Aminta would not try to protect them once inside, it was depressing that she had chosen to throw them to the wind quite so quickly.

Nico closed his eyes in disappointment. A second later he opened them again, realizing his mistake. He quickly coughed to clear his throat. "I can't believe how spineless you are," he growled out at Aminta. "Handing us over was one thing, but dooming your own people to this… snake? You're no better than him."

The only comment he got was a "How rude!" from Python. No else said anything.

Perhaps Nico was laying it on a little thick, but he couldn't help it. He felt like he was desperately trying to salvage the wreckage of a sinking ship. The only allies they might have had were gone now. He could only hope Aminta wouldn't take her new vow to heart and confess all of their plan to her new leader.

But Nico thought he knew her a little better than that. Aminta had made it clear she held no love for Python or his rule; she was only doing this to protect her people.

Aminta stood again, ignoring Nico's outburst. "My Lord, I would like to leave these prisoners in your care. I heard rumor that they are of value to you. Please take them as a gift from myself and my people. I'd like to be rid of them."

Python nodded slowly, green eyes glittering. He walked slowly in front of the four demigods. Nico couldn't help but feel like he was sizing them up for his next meal. "You heard correctly. These kids are quite important to me. Especially this one."

Python stopped directly in front of Will, whom stood glaring at him in defiance. His blue eyes blazed like the sun. Python reached out, as if to touch Will's face and Nico's stomach tightened. For a split second he found himself recalling how Zeus had warned Will to be careful that Python did not find out about Apollo's powers within him.

Will stepped away from Python, breathing harshly. "Don't touch me."
Nico saw something dangerous flash in the poisonous pools of Python's eyes. He didn't like him, or anyone, looking at Will like that. He opened his mouth, but Cecil beat him to the punch.

"Get away from him. Leave Will alone," the son of Hermes said. His knuckles were white from the strain of pulling at the ropes around his hands.

"Yes, leave him alone, please," someone said, a droning, nasally voice. Nico followed the sound to another one of the men in the room.

This one had close-cropped, light brown hair which was streaked with grey, and almost black, cruel eyes. His skin was tan but weathered. He might have been handsome once, in a cold way, but his face was marred in deep, jagged scars. His eyes flickered darkly as he grinned coldly at them, teeth glinting. "This boy is nothing more than a frightened mouse, wretchedly pawing after what's left of his father. He's nothing special. Nothing… exciting."

Python raised an eyebrow. "That may indeed be true. Children," he said, holding his arm out towards the man. "Let me introduce you to a close friend of mine. His name is Agamemnon."

Agamemnon.

The name sounded familiar to Nico but he couldn't place it. But judging by the fact that Python had referred to him as a friend, he had a feeling he was not friends with Apollo. And by extension them.

Python tilted his head, bemused. "That is a name you would do well to remember, William."

"Don't call me that," Will ground out between his teeth. "It's not my name."

Python held his hands up. "My apologies, I did not mean to offend. But please, ask me why."

Will looked confused. "Why what?"

Python rolled his eyes impatiently. "Ask me why you should remember that name."

Will glared at him with a combination of hatred and mistrust. "No." He clamped his mouth shut.

Python's grew still. Then, with startling swiftness, his hand struck out like a snake, clasping Will's face harshly. Will yelped as his nails dug into his cheek. Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil all jumped as well, but before they could act the guards had grabbed them, holding them back.

"I said," Python spat, digging his fingers harshly into Will's skin, making the son of Apollo to gasp sharply, "ask me why."

Will didn't last long before he choked out, "W-Why?" Python paused for effect, watching Will struggle against his grasp. Finally, almost reluctantly, he released him. Will stumbled back, shaking from the shock.

As abruptly as he had snapped, Python's earlier calm demeanor reasserted itself. "Thank you for asking. As I was saying, the reason you should know that name is because Agamemnon is about to be world-famous. Not even just as far as the world. As far as Olympus. As far as the Underworld." Python's eyes glittered menacingly. "Farther than the Underworld."

Python stopped and looked pointedly at Will.

Will glared at him. "Why?" he asked between gritted teeth.

Python grinned. "My, my. You are a curious thing, aren't you? I'm afraid that wasn't much of a
challenge though. I fear training you won't be hard at all. That's disappointing. I like challenges. Your father was one. I don't think he was used to groveling on the ground."

From the look on Will's face, Nico was sure he was a split second from snapping and attacking Python. Honestly Nico couldn't blame him. The way Python talked made his skin crawl.

"But where was I?" Python continued, clasping his hands together. "Ah yes, Agememnon's fame. You know, I used to loathe Apollo. Over all the ages I was stuck down in Tartarus after he killed me, I plotted. I fantasized about my revenge, how I would peel the flesh from his bones, strip by strip."

Nico felt bile rise in his throat.

"But you know what they say about revenge though- how it's not all it's cracked up to be? How it can never fill that endless abyss inside you, even if you think it might? Well- and I don't mean to spoil any life lessons- it's all true."

Python shook his head with dramatic sadness. "Two weeks ago, after thousands of years, revenge was finally mine. At last I had my old enemy within my grasp, ready to pay the price. And it was fulfilling at first. I had a lot of fun for a few days. But then something happened. " Python paused, seemingly lost in thought. "Apollo gave up. I don't know why. I guess he just ran out of strength. You know, him being mortal isn't much fun- he's so weak and useless. He's not as exciting as I thought he would be. He told me all I needed to know."

Will's face was white. Lou Ellen and Cecil likewise were gaping at Python in horror. Nico wished he had his sword so he could chop his head off, just so he could never say these things again.

"I was enraged, as you can imagine," Python continued conversationally. "Here I had plotted revenge for over a thousand years only to find out the truth about Apollo; that he is weak and pitiful. A waste of a God and a waste of my time. Let me tell you, revenge is nothing but exhausting."

Nico wondered how Python would react if he puked on him.

Will's lower lip was trembling slightly but his expression was hard. Nico didn't fall for the look; he had often forced that same expression onto his own face when he was trying to be strong.

"But there is good news!" Python said suddenly, brightly, clapping his hands. Everyone in the room, including his own men, jumped at the sound. "I realized all of this before I, myself, fell into a pit of despair, became depressed, and began eating my feelings. Or whatever it is people do when they're depressed. I know now that the only solution is to remove that little caustic splinter once and for all. I am pleased to announce that I have made the self-empowering choice to sentence Apollo to death. At midday, the day after tomorrow, he will be given the honor to fight for his life in the arenas. He was a God, after all, and I am not unjust. It is his right to get the chance to die heroically. His opponent will be Agamemnon, the fearsome son of Ares. He is unmatched in the arena."

If Python was expecting applause he was sorely mistaken. Agamemnon didn't look surprised by this news. He watched Python with cold boredom, like Python had merely given him some extra homework.

Nico chanced a glance over at Aminta and Agnete. Agnete's expression was indiscernible, but her sister's head was lowered, hiding her face from view.
Will was trembling. His pale blue eyes had grown wide at Python's announcement. He shook his head desperately. "Don't do this. It's not necessary. Please just let Apollo come with us. We'll leave here. We won't come back. Please don't kill him. He's done nothing wrong."

"He wronged me," Python said. "All those years ago. Everyone must answer for their actions eventually."

"Please," Will repeated desperately. "You wanted me to come here. I must mean something to you. Right now Apollo's mortal, he's no more important than I am. If you let him go, I- I'll fight in his place."

Nico gasped. "Will, don't!" he shouted, voice cracking. This was insanity. He knew Will was upset, they all were, but he wasn't thinking clearly. Will couldn't fight, he had no chance-

Thank the Gods Python wasn't buying it either.

"I think not. I do not wish for you to die, Will. This is Apollo's fate. There is no point in your death. It would be meaningless. I don't believe in meaningless death."

Thank the Gods, Nico thought fervently. Python may be a twisted lunatic but at least he was only partly a twisted lunatic. Mostly.

"Then why am I here?!" Will shouted. This is it, Nico thought, he's gonna lose it.

"Will-," he began but Will was beyond listening.

"Why did you bring me here?! What's the point? If you just wanted to lock us up-,

Python held up his hand, cocking his head to the side. "What makes you think I am going to lock you up?"

Will paused, mouth open. "Well… what else would you do with us?"

Python made that sound in his throat again, the one Nico thought might be a laugh. "My dear child, I am not going to lock you up. I am not going to lock any of your friends up either. What sort of host do you think I am?"


Python winced. "That stings. No matter. I am going to let you roam free of course. You are my honored guests. I have already arranged a place for you to stay- not a cell, mind you, a nice place- and you are free to explore the city. It really is beautiful up here."

"Explore the city," Nico repeated. This words sounded almost humorous. "With all those monsters?"

Python regarded him with a frown. "That's not a very pleasant tone, son of Hades. They too are my guests. But if it makes you feel better, I will spread the word that none are to harm you. You are under my protection here."

"We don't want your protection," Cecil snarled.

Python chuckled softly. "But you certainly need it. You have a bad track record in defending yourselves." He turned and walked over to a table along one of the walls, picking up an object Nico hadn't noticed before.
Lou Ellen gasped. "My mirror!"

"Yes it is," said Python. "I have all your weapons here. Morpheus brought them over a day ago."

He smirked at their shocked looks. "Yes, Morpheus and his brothers are very much alive. Somehow you managed to spook them away before, which I find a little puzzling… I must say this mirror is particularly fascinating. If I am not mistaken it once belonged to Aphrodite herself."

Lou Ellen said nothing, but Nico knew this to be true. He also knew she cared little about the actual uses it had and mainly for the sentimental value it had.

Python handed the mirror to Hybris. "If you wouldn't mind, please take this to the weapons room."

"Yes, my lord."

Hybris bowed with a flourish and left the hall, taking Lou Ellen's mirror with him.

Will let out a breath as the huge gold doors swung shut behind the man. "So your not going to lock us up, and your not going to hurt us… why exactly did you want me to come here?" he snapped.

Python's green eyes seemed to grow even more poisonous. His lip curled. "You are slow, aren't you? The answer to that is simple really. I want you to watch your father die. And I want you to know there is nothing you can do to stop it. And then I want you to take all that bubbling rage and hatred, and carry it home with you to your siblings and let it infect them as well. I want to watch you all poison yourselves."

Will gaped at him. "That… doesn't make any sense."

"I advise you not to worry about it," Python said sharply. "Worrying never helps. But enough of this for now. I have an important meeting with someone in a few minutes. I will speak to you again later. For now I want you and your friends to rest. Unbind their hands and release them," he ordered to the guards. "Agnete will show you where you will be staying."

Agnete led the four demigods back the way they had come.

"Lord Python wishes for you to stay in the city." Agnete cast the four of them a look as she walked. "I see you decided to heed my advice and find my people."

Will opened his mouth but Nico interrupted him before he could respond.

"Lot of good it did us," he said testily, watching the blonde woman for her reaction.

Agnete's brown furrowed. "Yes, I am surprised at my little sister. Almost two-hundred years I have known her and she has always been the soft-hearted one. I did not think she would betray you once she heard your story."

Two hundred years? Nico thought, stunned. He supposed it made sense. After all time slowed down around Lotus Eaters didn't it? It wasn't just the Lotus Hotel and Casino, it was the Lotus Eaters themselves.

To their right, Nico's attention was caught by the sight of Hybris emerging from a building. He made a mental note of the location. If he was coming from stowing Lou Ellen's mirror, than the rest of their weapons might also be that way. That could be useful.

Once in the heart of the city again, Agnete led them into one of larger buildings. Inside, a harpy
girl stood at the front desk, rustling papers.

"These demigods need rooms," Agnete said. "Python's orders."

"Of course," the girl twittered. Her eyes were red. She fiddled behind her desk for a moment and emerged with a key. She tossed it to Cecil, flashing him a fanged smile and batting her eyelashes.

Cecil gave her what appeared to be his best attempt at a handsome grimace.

"I must get back," Agnete said. "I take it you know how to find your room without my help?"

They nodded.

"Hey Agnete," Lou Ellen said suddenly, making the blonde woman pause. "I don't know what it's worth… or if it's worth saying at all… but thank you. For… whatever."

Agnete searched their faces, looking for what Nico didn't know. "No need to thank me," she said slowly. "After all, I'm not helping you. There is only one person I am truly loyal to…" Her eyes misted over for a second, thinking about something. Then, with that dramatic declaration, she left.

"She must really care about her sister," Cecil commented lightly.

They found their room easily on the second floor. Cecil slid the key in and turned the handle, opening the door.

They all filed in.

Upon entering Nico had to admit, for a place run by monsters it was pretty orderly. Besides the smell, that was. The air was thick and stagnant like no one had occupied it in years. A single door was to the left, probably a bathroom. There was a window on the far wall, which Nico already wanted to open just to get fresh air in the place. The room wasn't fancy by any means, but at least it was relatively clean. Four small floral-print beds lined one wall, facing towards an old pine dresser with an old TV and VCR on top. Everything was robed in a thick layer of dust.

"Could be worse, I guess," said Cecil, running a finger trail through the dust on the dresser. "At least there's no bloodstains on the walls."

"Or bodies in the closet," added Lou Ellen, peering behind the door. "Oops, I mean bathroom."

"I suppose that's something," Nico sighed. "On the bright side it's not like this day can get any worse."

"No kidding," remarked Cecil, sitting on one of the floral beds. "Python's a monster. Don't let anything he said get to you Will. We're gonna find Apollo and… and… Will? Are you okay?"

Nico turned in concern to look at Will, who still stood in the doorway staring into the room with a look of unveiled horror.

"Oh Gods," he breathed. "This isn't happening."

Nico's heart sunk. "Will I know this is hard, but we will save Apollo. Python is insane. He's all talk. We'll kill him and-,

"It's not that," Will choked out.

Nico blinked. "It's not? What could be worse than what he said?"
Will took a deep breath, gazing around the room like it was his worst nightmare come to life-
"The room," Will said anxiously. "I've been here before. It's- It's the room from my dream."

Jason

Two and a half hours ago.

Rain splattered in a heavy chorus against the window of the Zeus Cabin. Jason sat cross-legged on his bed, watching the droplets bleed down the glass, lost in thought. Outside the sky was nearly black from the downpour, the clouds spiraling like a whirlpool.

Sharp knocking came from the door, making him frown. Who in Hades would be outside at a time like this?

Pushing himself up, he made his way to the door and opened it. In piled Piper, Annabeth, and Percy, all partially soaked despite the umbrellas they had found. Jason figured they must have acquired them from the Stoll twins since the camp didn't have any umbrellas.

Bad weather wasn't supposed to make it inside the border.

"It's f-freezing out there," Piper stuttered, pushing her damp hair back from her face.

Jason wrapped his arms around her in greeting, placing a quick kiss on the back of her hair. "No kidding. What are you guys doing out there?"

Percy shrugged. "We're not out there. We're in here."

Annabeth rolled her eyes as she shrugged off her jacket. "We needed to talk. Something is going on up there, and I have a feeling it's nothing good."

By 'up there' Jason assumed she meant Olympus. He opened his mouth ready to say… what? Nah, I'm sure everything's perfectly fine! Because that would sound totally convincing.

"Annabeth's right," Piper said, taking a seat on the edge of Jason's bed. "Something is wrong. The Gods have been almost completely silent since Apollo disappeared. If anything they should have been upset but we never saw any signs. At least not like this." She looked out the window. "Something's set them off."

"Yeah," Percy agreed. Jason frowned as he also sat on Jason's bed, tracking rainwater onto the covers. "I've never seen Zeus create a storm like this one. And I've seen him pretty mad and vengeful. Something's wrong. Have you heard anything else from Nico and the others since they left the Lotus Eaters?"

"No," Jason said. That had been… almost two days ago. According to what Will Solace had told them Apollo was to be executed in another two days time. That more than likely meant that his friends had reached Mount Parnassus by now. They still some time.

So why was Zeus so angry right now?

"I hate this," Jason said, sitting between Percy and Piper, and doing his best to make sure Percy the least amount of room. "I hate being in the dark. We should be helping."

"That won't exactly be easy," Piper said. "There's no way we could make it to the mountain to help Nico and the others, and no one else wants to tell us what's going on. The God's don't like admitting
when they need help."

Unfortunately Piper was correct. The idea left Jason frustrated. They had saved the Gods countless times and still they hesitated to trust their children. Of course, maybe if Apollo had chosen not to trust Octavian then none of this mess would be happening.

Another crack of lightning resounded outside, illuminating the world for a fraction of a second.

Annabeth scrunched her nose. "Nessa let me check the radar on my laptop using the Hephaestus cabin's wifi, and it looks like there's a tornado forming."

Jason looked at her quickly. "You think the border can keep it out?"

"It should. But there shouldn't be any tornados right now anyways. We have to do something."

"Like what?" Percy asked. Jason saw he had was twirling Riptide- as a pen- nervously in his hand. "If you see any monsters to fight just point them out."

"That's not what I mean," said Annabeth. She hesitated, grey eyes almost as stormy as the outside. She took a deep breath. "Jason's right. We can't sit here, waiting for news if Tartarus has risen."

She shuddered and shared a look with Percy, who had frozen in the midst of twirling his pen. "We need answers. I think we should go to Olympus."

Nico

"The room?" Nico repeated blankly. "What room? What are you…" his voice trailed away as he began to understand.

Will looked utterly horrified like… well, like his nightmares were coming to life. He stood transfixed in the doorway, eyes flitting around the room, probably searching for some sort of discrepancy between his dream and the place in which he now stood.

Nico chewed his lip, nodding his head. He turned in a slow circle, taking in the scene of the potential crime. "So this is where I'm going to bite the dust? Or should I say… eat the pillow?"

Will gasped. "No! …Well, yes… But no!"

To Will's obvious horror Nico wandered over to the couch and pointed at it. "Right here?"

Will made a strangled squeaking sound and nodded. Naturally Nico threw himself comfortably down on the couch. "Like this?"

"GET UP!" Will screamed, looking almost deranged from the apparent horror. "What's wrong with you? Are you trying to tempt fate?"

Nico couldn't help but grin as he pushed himself up. "Come on Blondie. Calm down. Your being-,

Will backed out of the doorway, shaking his head. "Don't tell me I'm being ridiculous, Nico. This isn't a joke," he shouted. He reached up to run a hand anxiously through his hair, still eyeing the room like it might attack him. "Don't you get it?! Everything I've dreamed about is coming true! I can't be here. If I stay… I'm going to hurt you."

Nico groaned and rubbed his eyes. Why was Blondie so good at causing headaches? "Will, listen to me; there is no plausible reason why you would hurt me. Maybe you were having a normal, albeit, weird dream and it got jumbled up with one of the prophetic ones or something, but there is
no way in hell you would try to kill me, got it? Besides, you couldn't kill me if you tried."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Oh yeah? I have Apollo's powers now. I'm pretty certain I'm stronger than you. What if that's how I kill you?"

Nico crossed his arms. "Okay, I'm not much of an expert on Apollo's powers, but I'm pretty sure that suffocating people with pillows isn't one of his specialties."

"Okay, so maybe the details might not be completely accurate but I could still kill you-!"

Nico raised an eyebrow. "So your admitting your dream probably wasn't accurate?"

Will threw his arms up. "You're impossible! I'm saying I don't know!"

"If I'm impossible then you're an idiot," Nico snapped. "Besides where else could we even go? Would you rather go sleep on the monster-infested streets? This is the place Python assigned us to stay. I don't know about you but I don't think it'd be wise to anger Python right now, especially since we have no idea what we're doing!"

Will groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Gods, your giving me a headache."

"Your giving yourself a headache you paranoid weirdo."

Will didn't dignify that sentence with a response.

"I think Nico's right, Will," Lou Ellen said softly. She wandered over to the son of Apollo, and placed a hand on his arm. Will lowered his hand and looked over at her. "I know this is terrifying and we don't fully understand what's going on, but we shouldn't make any rash decisions. I've known you for years; you're one of my best friends. You even saved my life when I first got to camp, remember? You've never hurt anyone and you're certainly not going to start now. In fact… if it makes you feel any better, Cecil and I can promise to always make sure at least one of us is with Nico."

Nico had been pretty impressed with the daughter of Hecate's reasoning until the last part. "Wait, what? I don't need a chaperone-!"

"Tough," said Cecil, clearly warming to Lou Ellen's idea. "Come on Nico, let's do it for Will."

Nico stared at them in disbelief. This was perhaps the stupidest thing he'd ever encountered, but none of them seemed to be backing down. He wanted to yell that Will was being insane and overreacting but before he could Cecil turned to him, facing away from Will and Lou Ellen. He spoke low enough for only Nico to hear; "Don't make him have to worry about losing another person he cares about."

Nico blinked, startled by this sudden, comforting side to the son of Hermes. Usually he took after the Stoll twins, creating mischief and pranks with everything he did. It was very rare for Cecil to be so serious and responsible. It almost reminded Nico of Luke.

Nico sighed resignedly. "Alright, fine."

Cecil looked over at Will. "Happy now?"

It took a moment but Will nodded and stepped slowly into the room like he was walking to his funeral. Or Nico's. He sat gingerly on one of the beds, hands clenched over his knees.
"Can we talk about the elephant in the room now, please?" asked Lou Ellen, placing her hands on her hips.

They all stared blankly at her.

"Our plan was a complete disaster," Lou Ellen exclaimed. "Python was supposed to throw us in the dungeons with Apollo so we could give him back his power. Instead he's given us a hotel room—an apparently cursed hotel room—she added with a glance towards Will, "-and invited us to watch the show. How are we going to find the dungeons now?"

"Maybe we could find Aminta, or even Agnete, and they could help us. Agnete might know where it is," Cecil suggested half-heartedly.

"I don't think they'd be willing to help us now," said Will. "Aminta only agreed to our plan because it would help make her look good if she delivered us to Python. If she helped us now and was discovered she could endanger her people. And I'm not sure Agnete really helps anyone besides herself." Will paused and frowned. "Do you think Agnete knows that her sister was actually helping us?"

"I don't think so," Nico said honestly. "She seemed surprised when Aminta dragged us in there. Of course, she may have been lying. That's one thing we do know; she's a good actor."

Will let out a shaky breath. "I'm sorry. I had a shot and I missed it. I was... I wasn't thinking."

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil all stared at him.

"What in the world are you talking about?" asked Lou Ellen.

"Yeah," said Cecil. "When was this shot and how did I not notice it?"

Will chewed his lip. "He was right in front of me. I have Apollo's power. I could have..."

"What?" Nico interrupted. "Killed him? We were completely surrounded by his guards. If you had attacked him they would have killed us."

"Maybe then he would have locked us in the dungeons," Will said hollowly. He reached up and touched his cheek, where a faint red mark had been left from Python's hand. The memory made Nico's stomach clench. A faint glow emanated from Will's hand. After a second he lowered it, but the mark was still there.

Nico's eyebrows rose. "Your powers aren't working?"

Will shook his head. "Not on me. I think I can heal others, just not myself." He winced and dropped his head into his hands.

"It makes my head hurt when I try."

"You shouldn't try then," Nico said immediately. "Not until we get Apollo's power out of you. That amount of power might be too much for your body to handle since you're not a god."

Will nodded. "Fine. But we need a new plan. Any ideas?"

"First things first," said Nico. "We need weapons. I'm not walking on these streets without one."

"We could steal some from the guard-quarters," Cecil suggested. "We passed it on the way here."
"No," Nico said. "Python said our weapons were brought here. I want my sword back."

"And I want my mirror back," Lou Ellen added. "With all the enchantments on this mountain I doubt we can send Iris messages. Nico probably can't even shadow travel here. My mirror could prove useful if we need to contact camp."

"Okay," said Cecil. "When Hybris confiscated Aminta's weapons and took them away I saw him returning from one of the buildings. We could start there."

"Sounds good," said Lou Ellen. "But Python told Will to stay put for tonight. What if he shows up and he's not here?"

"I could stay here, I guess," Will said. He sounded miserable at the idea.

"Well, I'm not leaving you alone," Nico said immediately.

"Then Cecil and I will go get the weapons," said Lou Ellen.

Will looked aghast. "No! You can't leave Nico and I alone together. There's no telling what I'll do to him!"

Nico winced at Will's unfortunate wording. "Aww, I was hoping we could have a pillow fight."

Will ground his teeth together.

Cecil sighed. "Okay, Nico and I will get the weapons. Lou and Will will stay here in case Python decides to turn up. It'll be easier with just the two of us anyways. How's that?"

They all nodded in agreement.

As Nico and Cecil walked back out into the hallway, Will stopped the door from closing with his hand. He poked his head out after them. "You guys will be careful right?"

Nico and Cecil shared a glance. "No we're going to run out there and rally the villagers," Cecil said.

"Haha." Will watched Nico closely though, waiting for an actual answer.

"Of course," Nico said quietly. "We'll be back in no time."

Will nodded slowly. "Good."

The door clicked shut, and Nico and Cecil hurried out of the hotel and back out to the streets.

Jason

Two hours ago.

Since it was storming so hard it was fairly easy for the four of them to sneak out of camp. Or it should have been.

"Hey!" a boy shouted, voice almost lost in the wind.

Jason turned, squinting to see through the rain. They had tried to being umbrellas but it was blowing sideways and they had quickly been turned inside out. Instead Jason, Piper, Percy, and Annabeth were making-do with heavy raincoats. They weren't enough to stop Jason's pants from
getting soaked though.

Running after them, to Jason's surprise, were Austin and Kayla. Jason blinked as they made it to the four demigods, sending sleet splashing. They were both armed with bows and their swords.

"Oh," Annabeth said in surprise. "Hey guys… we were just… um…on border patrol."

Austin raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "In this weather? I'm sure. Where are you guys sneaking off to?"

Jason, Percy, Piper, and Annabeth looked uneasily at each other. Jason cleared his throat. "We could ask you two the same thing."

"Well the answer to that depends," Kayla said. Her words were nearly drowned out by a thunderous crack of lightning. She jumped slightly at the sound.

"On?" Piper asked quizzically.

"On where you're going," said Austin. "Come on, we won't tell. We saw you all leave Jason's cabin and knew something was up. No one would be out in this storm without good reason."

Jason and Percy exchanged nervous glances, but for once they seemed to agree on the best course of action; honesty.

"We're going to Olympus," Percy said. "We need to speak to the Gods."

Austin raised an eyebrow. "You want to talk to Zeus with this storm going on?"

"Because of this storm," Annabeth answered. "Something's angered them. It's too dangerous for us to be stuck in the dark anymore. We need to know what's going on."

"Now that we've answered your questions, why don't you answer ours?" said Piper. "Why are you guys armed? And following us?"

Kayla and Austin shared a glance and seemed to come to a decision. "Because were coming with you," said Kayla.

Jason stared at them. "You are?"

"This is our fight too," Austin said, surprisingly fierce. "Our dad's life is in danger. I've watched enough of my siblings die; Lee, Michael. I'm not going to wait for Will to be added to that list."

Part of Jason wanted to argue. He wanted to tell them to go back to their cabin and take care of themselves. But what Austin said was also true. Perhaps the best way to take care of themselves was for them to take care of the people they loved. Jason could understand that.

He sighed. "Fine. You guys can come. But we probably need to catch you up on stuff along the way."

Kayla nodded, her grip tightening on her bow. "Good call. What do we need to know?"

"Let's just get out of this rain first," Annabeth said smartly. "We'll get into the city and explain there. Do you think you guys have any sort of ride?"

Austin and Kayla looked at each other. Kayla smirked slightly. "I think we can manage it."
Annabeth nodded. "Good. Then let's go."

The six of them hurried over the border and down to the highway.

Nico

Nico and Cecil managed to make it back up to the door they had seen Hybris emerge from without getting attacked by any many monsters, though they certainly got some bloodthirsty side-eye.

Cecil motioned with his chin. "That's the door. We need to get in there. I wonder how many guards are inside?"

Nico clenched his hands into fists. "Dunno. I can take them out though."

"Uh, okay, let's try a more subtle approach," Cecil said hurriedly. "We need to sneak in without people noticing. As long as Python's letting us roam the streets we don't want him to think were causing trouble."

Nico supposed he was right. "Got any ideas?"

Cecil cocked his head. "Actually yes." He marched towards the building, leaving Nico to scurry after him.

"You're just going to walk in?" Nico hissed incredulously.

"It's so overt it's covert," Cecil stated. He sighed. "What an ingenious idea."

Nico had no idea what he was talking about. "But-,

"Yo, Hybris," Cecil shouted, walking straight into the guards office. "I got a bone to pick with you-!"

Nico ran in after him in time to see some other guy who was certainly not Hybris straightening up from a desk. He was dressed in a similar uniform though. Cecil recovered quickly. "Where's Hybris?" he demanded loudly.

The guy glared at them. "Not here. What do you want?"

Cecil gulped. Whatever his plan was, Nico was ready to be impressed. "I- have an issue. This is where people come when they have issues, right?"

"It can be," the guy repeated slowly, raising an eyebrow. "What is your issue? A problem with another guest or-"

Cecil shot Nico a look and seemed to get inspired. "Yes, my issue- and I do have one- is, um, that…” Cecil took a deep breath, puffing himself up to deliver the punchline. "Our room does not have enough pillows."

Nico eyes widened.

Cecil nudged him.

"Er, yes," Nico added quickly. "We only have two each. I need at least three… to… um… help my back problems."

The guy stared at him in disbelief. "Are you kidding me? Call room service if you need more
"pilows!"

"But-," Cecil began but Nico spoke over him.

"You know what, I think your right. In fact, all this talk about pillows had made me really sleepy. Aren't you sleepy?" he asked the guard.

The guy blinked. "Um, no."

"You are," Nico insisted. Under his breath he added, "Koimao."

The guard swayed on his feet, eyes drooping. Nico jumped forward and grabbed him to keep him from falling noisily to the ground. He lowered him back into his chair.

Cecil whistled softly. "I didn't know you could do that."

"It's not a trick I normally advertise."

Nico watched as Cecil rummaged through the papers on his desk, coming upon a stack of detailed drawings. "Hey! Maps of the city. This could be useful. I don't think he'll miss one of these." Cecil folded and pocketed one.

"We should go," Nico said nervously. "He won't stay asleep forever."

A long hallway led from the back of the room, which they followed. There were several doors branching off from it. Nico peeked inside an open one and saw what looked like an interrogation room, with a two-way mirror along the far side.

At the end of the hall a small sign was glued to the wall. To the right was Lost and Found, Waterboarding-Equipped Room, Torture Chamber, and Elevator. To the left was Employee Lounge, something called the Incineration room, and Confiscated Goods.

Nico and Cecil looked at each other and then headed left. Abruptly Cecil tugged Nico sideways, pulling him into an open doorway. They held their breath as a guard passed by, talking on some sort of walkie-talkie. "Again?" he was saying. "Isn't she sick of her cell yet? That boyfriend of her's is really getting on my nerves. If he doesn't get it working again soon, Python is going to be most displeased. Yes, I'll go find Hybris..." Then his voice was out of earshot.

"What was that about?" Cecil mouthed to him.

Nico shook his head and shrugged. "Who knows. But if he's going that way, we need to get a move on. He's about to discover our tired friend."

They hurried quickly down the hallway, peering cautiously in the doorways until-

"Jackpot," Cecil whispered excitedly. Nico looked over his shoulder and understood. They had found a room full of various objects. Most were weapons, presumably confiscated from monsters. Nico spotted his sword instantly; the dark metal seemed to suck the light out of the room. He moved to it quickly, enjoying the familiar feeling of the hilt.

It was good to have his sword back. Lou Ellen's mirror was also easy to locate- there was nothing else like it. Finding Will's bow took a little longer. Nico and Cecil quickly skimmed the line of bows stacked along one of the counters, searching for the mark of Apollo on it.

"Here's Will's," Nico whispered. He froze at the sound of footsteps approaching.
Cecil mouth tightened. "We need to get out of here!"

"But what about your sword?" Nico asked worriedly. "Don't you want-?"

"I'll just grab one of these ones. It doesn't matter. My sword wasn't that great anyways. It was just one of the training ones from camp." Cecil sighed. "At least we got Lou's mirror."

The footsteps were close now. There was no time to escape. Nico grabbed Cecil by the arm and pulled him over to the door. They pressed against the wall, waiting. If someone were to walk in they would, hopefully, be able to take them by surprise. Nico held his breath as the footsteps grew nearer. Not one person he realized, but two.

"I don't have time for this." Nico recognized Hybris's sharp voice. "What use is it keeping her locked up down there? It's only supposed to be reserved for the most important prisoners. Apollo's the only other one down there. I don't know why Python cares so much about her."

"Beats me," said another man's voice. It sounded like the man who had been talking on the walkie. "Python is insisting."

Nico breathed a sigh of as Hybris and the other man kept walking, past the room in which he and Cecil hid. Nico looked over to meet the son of Hermes' eyes. He looked equally stunned.

"You don't think…"

"That they're on their way to where Apollo is locked up right now?" Cecil breathed. "Yeah, I do."

Nico chewed his lip. Almost at the same time they said, "We need to follow them."

Cecil peered around the corner carefully. "They're getting on the elevator!"

Nico winced. Well that would make it harder to know where they were going. He heard a soft ding, and knew that the doors were probably already closing. "Well, at least we have some idea where to go…"

Once the hallway was empty, he and Cecil snuck back down the hallway to where the elevator was. Cecil pressed the lower button.

It felt like they waited for almost a minute. Nico's heart pounded in his chest. He gripped his sword tightly. His palms were sweating again.

They both jumped when the elevator dinged again, the silver doors sliding open. Nico stared at the blank space within the elevator, hesitating. Cecil dragged him on board. "What floor do you think it is?" Cecil asked.

Nico frowned at the buttons. There must have been at least one hundred of them. At the very least he could make an educated guess. He pressed the lowest one.

The doors slid shut with low bang.

Nico's stomach did a somersault as they began to descend.

Jason

One hour ago.

Tempest touched down a block away from the Empire State building, hooves clacking against the
wet pavement. Jason and Piper quickly slid from his back. Ten feet away Blackjack landed, carrying Percy and Annabeth. A second later, a small chariot landed in the street, pulled by a palomino Pegasus.

Austin and Kayla hopped down from the chariot.

"That's one heck of a ride," Percy commented lightly.

"We figured our siblings wouldn't miss it for a few hours," said Austin, shouldering his bow. "Only crazy people would fly it in this weather."

They quickly ran to the Empire State building, filing in through the doors. The guy at the front desk winced as they tracked water onto the floor, shoes squelching over the tiles.

"Six hundredth floor please," Percy told him firmly.

"Ain't got no six hundredth floor, kid. Move along," the guy muttered.

Percy smiled. "That one never gets old. Now really, we don't have a lot of time. I don't know if you noticed but Zeus seems pretty pissed right now. We need to talk with him. Let us up."

The guy eyed their weapons, before picking up a magazine he'd clearly been reading before they showed up and flipping the page. "Believe me kid, I'd love to send you on up but I have my orders."

Percy frowned at him, brow furrowing. "Orders? What are you talking about?"

The guy shrugged. "Received an alert a few hours ago. The uh-," his eyes flicked around to make sure they were alone,"-six hundredth floor's been put under immediate lockdown."

All six of them gaped at him.

"Lockdown?" Jason demanded. "What do you mean lockdown?"

"Are you deaf? Lockdown. No one is allowed in or out."

"Why?" asked Austin. "What happened?"

The guy flopped his magazine down with a sigh. "Do I really look like I would have that sort of information?"

"Please," Piper said, her words layered in charmspeak. "We really need to get up there. Important business and all."

The guy stared at her, mouth hanging open. Then he blinked and shook his head. "Sorry Lady. That won't work on me. I get extra protection because of my position. The Gods don't want anybody sneaking into their home."

Kayla frowned at him as he flipped another page in his magazine. "Are they expecting someone to try to sneak in?"

The guy shrugged. "Word on Olympus streets say someone already has."

Jason gaped at him. "Someone broke into Olympus?"

"Forget I said anything," the guy said. He looked steadfastly at his magazine like it might make
them go away.

"Who broke in?" Percy demanded, eyes narrowing.

"What did they want-?"

"What happened?"

"We need to go up there-!"

"That's it," said the guy, setting down his magazine. "Don't make me call for backup. I don't have time-" his eyes drifted past the demigods and widened. "Oh dear."

They turned to see what he was looking at, and found themselves face-to-face with-

"Lord Hermes," said Percy. "What are you doing here? We were trying to go up to-,"

"Yes, I am aware," Hermes interrupted. "I came to tell you to stop terrorizing the security guy."

"Thank you," said the security guy.

"And I came to tell you," Hermes told the security guy, "that the lockdown is over."

"Lord Hermes, what's going on?" asked Piper. "Why was Olympus locked down? Why is Zeus so… so…" Her eyes flickered towards the door, beyond which rain showered into the streets of New York. Piper swallowed. "Well, he seems a little upset. We came to see if we might help."

Hermes rubbed his hands over his face. Now that Jason was paying closer attention he realized that Hermes looked utterly exhausted. His eyes were lined and tired. He looked older than Jason had ever seen him. "It is no use, my dear. We have searched Olympus high and low, and found no one. Whoever it was has…" Hermes winced like the next words pained him. "...eluded us."

Annabeth's eyes widened. "It's true then; someone broke into Olympus?"

Hermes paused and looked absently at the blonde girl, not quite seeing her. His thoughts were clearly a thousand miles away. "It would seem that way…" Hermes's gaze turned to the security guy. "You are absolutely sure you did not let anyone in?"

The guy nodded immediately. "Completely sure. No one's even been here in the last few hours. Well, no one who knows about the six-hundredth floor."

Hermes sighed. "I would bring you to Zeus for questioning, but I can see you are not lying. That's a shame. It would make things simpler."

Percy's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean 'it would seem that way'? You sound like you're not completely sure."

Hermes winced. "It is… hazy." He in took his breath harshly, pressing a hand to his temple. "Apologies. Zeus is... er, talking to me. I must be off. We have little time."

From the look on Hermes' face Jason assumed it was less like talking and a lot more like shouting. Jason watched as his eyes widened. "Artemis is taking Antarctica?" Hermes murmured to himself. "I sincerely doubt they fled there. Oh and Athena is taking Africa? That's nice."

"Lord Hermes," interrupted Kayla. "What do you mean it's hazy? How do you not know if someone broke in?"
"And why does it sound like the Gods searching the globe for this person?" asked Percy. "What exactly did this intruder do? Did they steal something?"

Hermes chuckled mirthlessly. "Something like that."

A crack of lightning split the air, leaving behind the unmistakable scent of ozone. The hair on Jason's arm stood on end. Hermes had flinched and clutched his head again at the sound.

"What did they steal?" Piper asked with intensity. Jason could hear the faint traces of charmspeak beginning to creep into her words. "Please, we want to help. You know you can count on us. We've helped the Gods before."

Hermes shook his head. Jason watched in growing alarm as he gritted his teeth like he was in pain. "It's no use. You cannot help us now. We were trying to come up with a plan but our meeting was… interrupted."

"We can help look for this intruder," said Austin. "Tell us what he took. We'll find him."

"Even we cannot find him," Hermes muttered. "And do not ask me what he took; even if we were sure, I am not permitted to say."

Percy's eyes widened. "Does this meeting you mentioned have something to with… Tartarus? All the Gods were there?"

"Yes, we were," Hermes said softly, rubbing his chin as he thought. He shook his head, mumbling to himself. "It's the only thing that makes sense. They must have taken it, while we were all together. After all, we don't come together often, do we? If only I could remember…!"

"What can't you remember?" Piper asked desperately.

"Dammit, I don't know!" Hermes shouted, making Piper flinch. "What's happened isn't possible… I mean, what we think might have happened isn't possible!"

Jason was beginning to feel exasperated. "What do you think happened?"

Hermes froze, staring past them at nothing Jason could see. "I think we are fools. I think we made a terrible, catastrophic mistake, coming together like we did today." He cocked his head to the side and began murmuring again, whether to himself or to Zeus Jason didn't know. "What I don't understand is how they could have done it! Poison? Spell? Perhaps Hypnos or some other sleep-related God chopped up one of their children again and fed it to us…" Hermes shuddered. "I remember that dinner."

"Poison?" Annabeth asked, grey eyes widening in alarm. "You guys were poisoned? You were attacked?"

Hermes's eyes locked onto the daughter of Athena and he paled. "I must go. I have already said too much. We must all leave immediately."

"Wait," Jason exclaimed desperately. "You're leaving? As in all the Gods are leaving Olympus?"

"We must," Hermes whispered. "We need to evacuate."

"Evacuate?" Kayla gasped. "Wait! But we can-,

With the blink of an eye Hermes was gone. The six demigod's stood in stunned silence in the lobby.
of the Empire State building, gaping at each other.

Percy gulped. "Well that was…"

"…completely useless," finished Piper. "We've figured out nothing. And now, after whatever happened, the Gods are fleeing? What in Olympus is happening? Literally."

"Hermes made it sound like the Gods were spreading out, searching for this person," said Jason.

"Sounded a lot like running to me," said Percy, brows knitting together.

"We learned something," said Annabeth. "The Gods were apparently attacked at their special meeting, and something was stolen. What I don't understand is how they aren't sure what was stolen. Can't they check?"

"Who even has that sort of power?" asked Austin.

Percy motioned to the security guy. "And this guy says he hasn't let anyone in. Does that mean it was an inside job?"

No one answered.

The silence was finally broken by said security guy clearing his throat. "So… Olympus is no longer under lockdown. Do you guys still want to go up? Of course, it sounds like none of the Gods are up there anymore."

The six of them all looked at each other. "That's okay," Jason muttered. "We should get back to camp. We need to let Will, Nico, Lou, and Cecil know what's going on. You know, if Python hasn't locked them up or something. Let's get out of here."

Will

Will paced the floor of the hotel room anxiously, waiting for Nico and Cecil to return. Lou Ellen lay on her stomach on her bed, watching him with a deep frown. Will looked out the window to where the sun was beginning to dip in the sky, painting the mountain in ruddy orange light. He was fairly good at calculating the time by its position. If he was correct… Nico and Cecil had been gone for almost two hours.

Since they had left Will had managed to keep himself thoroughly occupied; first by worrying about them, then taking a steaming hot shower- during which he lathered himself in some of the complimentary rosemary-scented soap and furiously scrubbed like he could wash away the impurities he had attained by being in the same room as Python. The thought of that rebarbative fiend with his hands on Apollo made his skin crawl. After getting dressed he paced the room for some unneeded exercise.

"This is taking too long. They should be back by now."

A soft knock sounded at the door.

"Thank the Gods!" Will crowed in relief, running to the door and flinging it open.

He blinked as he found himself looking at the little harpy girl from the lobby desk. She had a massive armful of puffy, white-

"Did someone request room service? More pillows?" she asked, cocking her head to the side. "I
just got a strange phone call from a very confused-

"What?" Will yelped, gaping at her. Was this some sort of joke? "No! I mean, no, thank you. We don't need any pillows… Actually, you know what? Maybe you should take the ones we already have-!"

"Will," Lou Ellen said sternly. "Stop it. You sound-,

It didn't matter what she said. Will was already snatching all of the pillows from around the room. "I'm not crazy!" he declared, looking quite crazy. He thrust the pillows at the harpy girl. "Take them!"

"Is something wrong with them?" the girl asked in confusion.

"No," exclaimed Will. He shoved them into her already full arms. "I mean yes, but…"

Lou Ellen sighed, apparently taking pity on Will. "He's trying to say that they're old and infested with bed bugs."

The girls ruby eyes widened. "Oh! Well I can wash them and bring them back in no time-!"

"No!" Will yelped. "Keep them! Keep them away from me!"

"He's sort of a germaphobe," Lou Ellen said helpfully. "You'd best keep them."

"Ah. Okay..." The harpy girl shifted the tower of pillows in her arm, and peeked cautiously into their room. "I don't suppose that other one is here… the hot one with the luscious, light brown hair and-,

Lou Ellen turned a delightful purple color. "He's not," she muttered. "He's busy…"

The harpy girl looked sad. "Oh. Where is he?"

"Uh…” Lou Ellen was clearly thinking quickly. Will saw a lightbulb ding on in her head and her eyes brightened. "He's got… severe indigestion. Trust me, you don't want to go near him."

"O-okay," said the harpy girl, eyes widening. "Well, I'll just be going then. Bye!"

She shut the door with a soft click.

Will snorted as he turned to Lou Ellen. "Nice. Scaring away the competition, I see."

"Shut up."

Will's smile faded. He threw himself down on the bed beside her with a huff. "Do you think something's wrong? They're taking forever…"

"Cecil and Nico are both smart," said Lou Ellen. "They won't get caught. They know what they're doing." Despite her uplifting words, her eyes betrayed her own worry. She twisted one of her braids around her finger, a habit of hers when she was nervous.

Will squirmed closer to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders so he could pull her in for a hug. "I'm sure you're right. I'm sorry if I'm being pessimistic, it's just…” Will trailed off, tugging on a fraying thread along the bedspread. He could still feel the soft sting of Python's nails digging into his skin. The thought made him shudder. But somehow that hadn't hurt anywhere near as much as some of the things he had said.
He could feel Lou Ellen watching his face intently. "I get it," she said quietly. "I don't blame you. I-,"

A rapid pounding on the door drew their attention. "That must be them," Will said excitedly. He jumped up from the bed and flung the door open, only to find himself once again staring into the face of someone who was certainly not Nico or Cecil.

"Greetings, lowly children," said Agamemnon, stepping into the room without waiting for invitation. "I see you are all settled in. That is good. Not that you had much to unpack." His lip curled into a sneer. He motioned towards Will with his hand. "I have come to collect you."

Will swallowed thickly. "Collect me?"

"Yes," said Agamemnon. "It would seem some rather important plans of Lord Python's have met a tiny little snag. He's requested your presence in the throne room. Come with me."
They must have been deep inside the mountain.

The corridor was made of stone, cold and dark. Their footsteps echoed sinisterly against the rocks. Every hundred feet or so there was a small torch, burning and flickering in the darkness, each one only close enough together to just allow someone to follow the hallway.

Normally Nico liked the underground but this place didn't feel right. This was desolate, threatening, lonely. An uncomfortable pressure had built up in his ears. Something cold splashed onto his neck. Nico shivered, wiping at it with his hand.

Water? He looked up in time to feel another droplet land on his cheek, just below his eye. He knew Parnassus was by the ocean… had they really descended that far? Given the pressure in his ears he had an unsettling feeling that beyond the walls the ocean churned, ready to crush in any moment.

"Nico, look at this."

Although Cecil had whispered, his voice seemed loud and harsh in the oppressive silence. Nico looked to where the son of Hermes was pointing. He could see the faint orange stripes glinting along the wall in the firelight. They looked like-

"Bars," Cecil whispered. He crept closer to it, reaching out a hand to touch the cool metal. "These are cells. And there's more of them."

Squinting down the hallway, Nico saw he was right. Nervousness blossomed in the pit of his stomach as he looked inside the closest cell. It was too dark on the other side of the bars to make out what was in there, but Nico could not sense any life in there.

Cautiously Nico and Cecil began to make their way down the old hallway.

He wasn't sure how far they walked, or how many cells they passed, but Nico began to count the torches. One, two, three…

Cecil peered into the next cell, and gasped sharply. Nico moved quickly to see what he was looking at. Could it be…?

A skeleton grinned crookedly at them in the far corner. Nico thought it looked rather welcoming, but he still took a minute to thank the Gods Will hadn't come with them. All of this darkness wouldn't have sat well with the son of Apollo.

Nico's chest tightened at the thought of Apollo, alone down here in the darkness, cut off from the world, the sun, with no one but Python for company. Nico didn't often house sympathy for others in these sorts of situations- he had spent so much of his own time alone in the dark- but he felt unsettled.
Yes, he was glad Will was not with them to see this place.

He cast a glance back to Cecil, who was walking steadily slower, trailing behind the son of Hades. "I can't believe Apollo is down here somewhere..." Cecil whispered. "I can barely stand it. No one should be locked up like this."

Nico had to agree. He would never forget what it was like to be locked up with no idea if rescue was near, or even coming. They peeked inside cell after cell; darkness, nothing, more emptiness—how many could there even be?!—more nothing, until at last a flash of blonde met Nico's eyes.

"Apollo!" he gasped loudly, running to grip the bars of the cell in his hands.

"You found him?!" Cecil ran over too.

If Nico hadn't known for a fact that Apollo was down here, he might never have recognized him in his current state.

Apollo sat against the far corner of his cell, back pressed against the cold stone, knees drawn towards his chest. His arms rested upon them, silver chains glinting at his wrists. They seemed to emanate a spectral blue glow. Nico recognized the familiar messy blonde head of hair instantly, though it was more of a dirty blonde color now from the obvious lack of a wash. Apollo was dressed in his usual faded jeans and white t-shirt, though his feet were bare and covered in dirt. His arms were decorated with various cuts and scrapes, some bruising over, some starting to scab.

He looked like he'd been cast down from the heavens and then walked all over.

Yes, it was indeed good that Will was not with them.

Python's going to pay, Nico vowed right there and then. Who does he think he is, torturing one of the Gods like this and threatening to raise Tartarus? It's not his right to decimate the world.

Apollo did not look up, even when both Nico and Cecil were directly in front of the bars of his cell.

"Apollo," Nico repeated, heart thudding in loudly in his chest. Why didn't he answer?

"What do want now?"

Nico's heart seemed to miss a beat at Apollo's voice, though he still hadn't looked up. "Apollo, it's us!" he exclaimed in a hushed whisper. "Nico and Cecil. We've come to get you out! Will's here too! I mean, not right here, but in the city."

Apollo finally raised his head only to lean it back against the wall behind him with a soft thump. He stared at the two demigods, unimpressed. "You can't honestly think I'm going to fall for this again."

Nico almost gaped at him, but managed to restrain himself just in time.

Apollo's face also hosted a horrifying array of injuries. His lower lip sported a particularly nasty gash and a deep cut near his brow seemed to be bruising around his eye. Beyond that Nico was struck by his resemblance to Will. With Apollo as hurt as he was, it did not sit well with him.

"We've..." Nico swallowed, trying to remember how a conversation worked. "Wait, what?"

"If you want something, say it. Otherwise leave me alone," Apollo muttered, pressing his lips together.
"What are you talking about?" Nico said, eyes wide. "Were here to rescue y-,

"Get out!" Apollo shouted, blue eyes flashing dangerously. "Just get out!"

Nico and Cecil both flinched. "Get out?" Cecil said blankly. He was shaking. "We're here to help-,

"I'm done playing your games," Apollo growled. Nico was relieved to spot another difference from Will; their appearances may have been similar but Nico had never seen such a bitter look on Will's face before. "Leave me alone."

Cecil stared at him openmouthed. No doubt he was wondering if Apollo had lost his mind over the past two weeks, but something was starting to click with Nico.

"You think we're Python?" Nico whispered, shocked. "We're not. This is real. We've come to-,

"Don't say it," Apollo said through gritted teeth. He lowered his head to stare at his hands. "Leave. Unless you're moving up the day of my execution, just leave. Please."

Nico stomach felt hollow. If Python had been playing some sort of mind game with Apollo, tricking him into thinking they'd come to rescue him before now, how could they convince him it was actually them this time?

"Will got your message," Nico said quietly, watching the top of Apollo's head. "Will came here to save you. We told the Gods what you said about the keys. We know you're trying to protect them, keep them safe. Now were going to save you. You have to believe me."

Apollo didn't respond immediately. Nico couldn't see his face to tell whether he was thinking over his words or if he had simply decided to ignore them.

"How would Python know you managed to speak to us?" Nico asked him quickly. "It's really us.

Apollo's brow furrowed. "I understand what is happening," he said slowly, nodding to himself.

Relief flooded through Nico, which was quickly hampered by Apollo's next words;

"I am asleep," Apollo whispered to himself, raising an eyebrow. "I am dreaming. This is a figment of my imagin-,

"You're not dreaming!" Nico protested loudly. Cecil quickly glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was approaching. "Snap out of it!"

"I wish I could," Apollo whispered miserably to himself. "I'm so sick of reliving this over and over…"

This was no good. Apollo clearly wasn't buying their story, even if it was true, and they didn't have unlimited time to convince him.

"How do we open this?" Nico muttered to Cecil, gripping the bars.

Cecil peered closely at the lock. "I could try to pick it…"

Apollo chuckled weakly, though he didn't look particularly amused. He winced, and reached up absently to touch his split lip. "Don't bother. It's enchanted. It can only be opened with the key. Or by myself. But I don't have any powers now, so that's pointless." Apollo shook his head sadly. "Python had to use the key because he's not as awesome as I am. What a peasant. A slimy peasant,"
he amended.

Nico's heart sank down to his toes. If they couldn't open it without the key…

Cecil leaned over to whisper, "We can't just leave him down here…"

Nico reached over to grab the lock, giving it a halfhearted tug, like he could open it through willpower alone. "Apollo…"

"Wake up!" Apollo muttered to himself. "Being mortal is so strange, falling asleep, hallucinating vividly while sleeping..." He shook his head. "How do you ever know what's real and what's made up? This explains why every mortal I've ever met has been a total nutcase!"

Nico and Cecil stared at him, unsure what to do. "Um, Apollo-," Nico began.

Apollo winced and closed his eyes. "None of this is real. Wake up. Wake up!"

"Hey, what did you mean when you said you lied about the keys?" Nico asked him suddenly. "Maybe if we knew it would help-,

"No!" Apollo said loudly. "You're not real. Or if you are, I know who you really are," Apollo glared darkly at them. "I will not tell you anything more. Don't try to trick me."

"Okay," Nico said desperately, thinking quickly. "Tell us what you already told us then. What did you already tell us about the keys?"

Apollo frowned down at the chains on his wrists. "The keys?"

"To Tartarus," Cecil added helpfully. He shot Nico a glance. Nico understood what he was thinking: Apollo was clearly not in his right mind. Or he was and was just exceptionally confused by being a mortal. Either way was it really right to be playing into his fear and confusion?

"O skopós agiázei ta mesa," Nico said quietly. "We'll get him out, just not now." To Apollo he said, "Tell us what you told, Python."

Apollo shivered, chewing on his lip. He winced again and stopped almost immediately. "The keys… require… the blood of the Gods."

Nico's stared at him, shocked. Okay, so he hadn't been prepared for that. "The… blood of the Gods?" he choked out. "Ichor? From… who? Zeus?"

Apollo sighed. "All of them."

Nico's mind had trouble keeping up with what he said. "You told Python that to unleash Tartarus he needed the blood of the Gods. But that was… a lie?"

Apollo shook his head.

Nico exhaled, feeling frustrated. He knew all the Gods liked to speak in riddles, and apparently Apollo still did too, even as a mortal. "That's not the lie?" Nico asked sharply. "What's the lie then?"

"That's it," Apollo said simply. He reached up to trace one of the cuts on his arm with his finger. The action looked difficult given the chains on his wrists. He took in his breath with a sharp hiss. "I don't recall being mortal sucking nearly this much. The last time was sooo much better. Less painful."
"I don't understand," said Cecil. "Please Apollo, what did you lie to Python about?"

"That is it," Apollo muttered. He reached up to rub his temple, chains clanging harshly. "That that is it."

It took Nico a moment to understand what he was trying to say. "You mean there's more to unlocking the cage? You told Python that the Gods' blood was all that was needed, but there's more to it?"

Apollo lowered his face into his hands. "Yes, but it doesn't matter anyways," he muttered, voice muffled.

"How does that not matter?" Nico yelped. He looked sheepishly down the hallway to make sure they were still alone.

"That task alone is impossible," Apollo mumbled. "My family fights too much. They never come together. Collecting blood, from all of them…it's a futile mission. They're too careful. They trust no one."

"But they are coming together," Cecil said slowly, looking at Nico.


"We have to stop them," Cecil concluded, to which Nico nodded. A soft echo sounded in the hallway from the direction they had come. Footsteps.

Someone was coming.

Nico turned desperately to Apollo. "Apollo what else must be done to release Tartarus? What's the last part?"

But Apollo clamped his mouth shut. "I will not fall for that. I know who you are!"

Nico opened his mouth but Cecil tugged on his sleeve urgently. Nico jumped and yanked his arm away. "We need to go," Cecil hissed. "Someone's coming."

Apollo froze at the words.

Nico knew he was right. There was nothing else they could do right now. They needed to get out of there before they were caught. They needed to warn the Gods. They needed to tell their friends what they had learned. He needed to find Will.

"We will get you out," Nico whispered forcefully to Apollo. Apollo may not have believed a word they were saying but he wanted to give him some hope to hold onto. "I swear it. You just have to hold on."

Apollo didn't appear to hear him.

"Let's go," Nico told Cecil. Some part of him felt ashamed. This was Will's father, they should stay, do everything it took to get him out right then and there. It's what Will would have done. But Nico knew nothing good would have come of it.

With a final look at Apollo's figure, he and Cecil fled down the hallway, away from the approaching footsteps and farther into the unknown. As luck would have it, it wasn't easy to get lost. There were no actual turnoffs, only small curves along the long hallway. They ran for a ways,
until they were both gasping, and then slowed to a walk.

"That was close," Cecil panted. "I wonder how deep this goes? There could be a-" He stopped in his tracks, looking into one of the cells.

"What?" Nico whispered. He took a breath and looked inside as well… and found himself suddenly remembering how the guards had spoken of a woman being locked down here as well. Well, a girl, as it turned out.

She was probably no older than sixteen. Her long hair fell in a thick braid over her shoulder, bits and pieces cascading around her face. Even in the dark Nico could make it out to be a light brown color with soft highlights, like caramel. He had never seen her before, but for some reason he felt as if he should know her.

She jumped, taking her breath in sharply when she saw the two demigods. She wore jeans and a simple white top, though they were covered in grime. Her eyes were an exotic almond-shape, brown in color, and full of suspicion.

"Intruders! They must be up ahead somewhere!" A shout rang out from down the hallway from behind them.

Nico's heart leapt into his throat at the sound. "Who are you?" he whispered to the girl.

She flinched slightly. Nico saw her eye him up and down, taking in his black clothes, the skull ring on his finger… Her brow furrowed.

"Hurry!" the man's voice barked distantly, though it was growing louder with every passing second. "Find them!"

"Nico… di Angelo?" the girl said quietly, uncertain.

Nico froze. "You know who I am?"

"Nico!" Cecil hissed, eyes wide.

Who was this girl? How did she know his name? Why was she only other one locked down here with Apollo? What made her so special to Python? There was no time to think about such questions right now. Light flickered back the way they had come, shadows dancing on the stone walls…

"I'm sorry," Nico whispered to her. "We have to go. We'll come back. We'll get you out too."

Leaving her to stare after them, they fled along the hallway.

Will

Will stared at Agamemnon in disbelief. Did he really expect Will to just obediently follow after him? "Oh yeah? Well tell Python I don't want to see him," he tried hopefully. The thought of having to see that disgusting excuse of a reptile again made his intestines curl. And no, it wasn't a pleasant feeling.

The man raised an eyebrow. "You don't believe you actually have a choice do you?"

Will did his best to channel his inner Nico, and glared at him.

"Where are your other friends?" Agamemnon asked suspiciously, looking between him and Lou Ellen. The daughter of Hecate had pushed herself off the bed when he entered. Now she moved to
"Out," she told him easily. "I thought we were allowed to explore a little?"

"You are." Agamemnon trailed a finger over the dust-covered dresser, leaving a trail behind. His hands were heavily scarred and calloused. The hands of a warrior. "Now come. Python does not like to be kept waiting. And trust me, he's in a foul mood."

"Well I'm coming too," Lou Ellen said, raising her chin defiantly. "You're not taking Will anywhere alone."

Agamemnon wrinkled his nose at her. "I expected no less. Scared are you, Will? Don't want to face Lord Python alone?"

"Like hell," Lou Ellen growled. "More like we don't trust him. He's a snake."

"I wouldn't tell him that. He might take offence. Now hurry up, or you'll have to explain to him how you enjoy wasting his time."

Will was getting a little exhausted of trekking up and down the mountain. The city was actually quite beautiful, despite the monsters, but very steep. His legs would be sore tomorrow.

He glanced at Agamemnon a few times as they walked.

"I think I've heard of you," Will said cautiously. "You knew my father."

Agamemnon glared at him. "Of course I knew your father."

"Must have been a terrible experience," Will commented bluntly.

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, for a start you want to kill him now," Will muttered with disgust. "So what's your problem with him?"

Agamemnon grinned although it looked more like a snarl. "Honestly, when it comes to Apollo and myself it's all just bygones. These are Python's orders, kid."

Will scowled at him, kicking at a piece of crumbling rock. It was a mistake. His toe throbbed. "What are you trying to accomplish by working for him? He's insane and evil."

"That is possibly very true," Agamemnon said conversationally.

"Then what can you hope to achieve by working for him?" Will exclaimed. A cluster of nearby spirits looked at him. Now that it was growing dark out, more of the undead seemed to be poking their heads out. Wonderful, Will thought, the word dripping with hypothetical sarcasm. Nico will be thrilled.

"Justice." The man's eyes turned dark. "I am not the only one who returned before Gaia's fall."

Will frowned. Justice? Who else had returned that Agamemnon would want revenge upon? His eyes widened. "You mean your wife? What was her name? Clytimestra? Didn't she stab you to death in the bathtub?" Will whistled admirably. "That's one heck of a welcome home from the war."

Now it was coming back to him; Agamemnon had been a commander in the Trojan War.
"You're quite the conversationalist, aren't you?" Agamemnon snarled, turning on him. Will took a half-step back as he reached for the dagger at his belt. "Speak her name again and I'll cut your tongue out and give it to your father as a present."

Will gulped, sealing his lips together. "But I thought Python wanted me alive?" he croaked testily. Agamemnon's eyes narrowed. "He does. You just won't be needing your tongue for what he plans for you."

Lou Ellen's brows drew together in anger. "Listen Jerkface-,

"And you," Agamemnon barked, pointing the tip of his dagger at her. Lou Ellen's eyes widened and she stepped back. "Both of you shut up and follow me if you know what's good for you."

Will found himself happy to comply; by the time they reached the throne room again he was out of breath again.

As they approached the golden doors they burst open and Hybris came marching out, face stormy. A couple of other guards followed behind him. His lip curled in twisted amusement as he saw the two demigods being led to their doom.

"Good, you brought them," he muttered as he stormed by. "Python's not pleased."

As if to support Hybris's words, Will heard Python's furious hiss from beyond the parted doors before they swung shut. "What do you mean it was not there?" The sound of his voice made Will's blood curdle. "There is nowhere else it could be!"

"Where do you think you're going?" Agamemnon growled back at Hybris.

Hybris smirked. Pulling up the hem of his shirt he tapped a walkie-talkie clipped to his belt. "Off for some fun."

Will didn't know what his definition of fun was but it couldn't have been pleasant. He hoped he wasn't going to the guard's office. What if Nico and Cecil were still there?

Agamemnon led them into the hall.

It wasn't as full as before; Python and only a few of his evil henchmen were there. Agnete and Aminta were absent. Will's stomach lurched as Python turned on them, eyes ablaze. The cut on his cheek tinged. But then Python's poison green eyes unhardened very slightly, more to a... mild puss green.

"Ah, William, it's a delight to see you again. How are you enjoying the city?"

Will scowled. Where was a pillow when he needed one? "What's going on? Why do you want to talk to me?"

Python raised his hairless eyebrows. "Right to business, I see. That's a nice quality, William."

Will gritted his teeth. He forced himself to look away from Python before he tried to throttle him. "Stop calling me that."

"Apologies." Python raised his hands. He took a rattling breath and all traces of pleasantry evaporated from his expression. Absentmindedly he reached up to pick at the white flesh of his left arm. It looked like his skin was peeling. "You know, it would seem that quite the little kerfuffle
Will didn't say anything. He looked over at Lou Ellen but she was watching Python with a look of moderate repulsion on her face. It was almost funny.

Python followed her gaze to his arm. "Oh, my apologies again. It's molting season."

Will was more than a little disturbed by that. He couldn't help but wonder if Python could actually shed off his skin completely like a snake, leaving behind a human-shaped cast of dead skin. The idea made him want to pass out. Or vomit. Not in that particular order.

Lou Ellen actually worked up the guts to speak again. "We heard your evil plot went wrong," she muttered, before growing pale. "Er, that is, I mean, we heard your clever plan went wrong. I hope it was nothing too serious."

Judging by the glare Python was throwing her, Will wondered if those would be her last words. He really hoped not. He could probably throw himself in front of her-

"My plan was perfectly sound, my dear. It seems I simply placed my good faith in an imbecile."

"What happened?" Will asked, probably sounding a little too excited about the failure.

At first he thought Python wasn't going to respond. "Something was supposed to be retrieved for me," he said slowly. Absentmindedly he reached down to pull off a flake of skin. Will gaped in horror as it fell to the floor. It was perhaps one of the most unhygienic things he'd ever seen, and he worked in an infirmary. Give him blood and severed limbs any day… but Python's dead skin cells? If he had any free time after this quest, he was going to go for a dunk in the Styx.

Its acidic burn was probably the only thing that would ever make him feel clean ever again.

"And… it… wasn't… retrieved?" Lou Ellen asked, staring at Python with wide eyes.

"Some things were," Python said conversationally. "One thing was not. It matters not. I will find it soon, but unfortunately this involves a change in plans."

Will cleared his throat. "What kind of change?"

"For one, I will have to stay your father's execution a little longer," Python told them slowly.

Will's head snapped up. "Seriously? That's amaz- Um, I mean wow, that really sucks. I'm sorry."

Python nodded sympathetically. "I know, it is disappointing. But it would seem he is a liar, and that I need more information from him before he dies. It would seem I was too easy on him before."

Just like that Will's relief was ripped away.

"You- you're going to…" His voice trailed away in horror at the unspoken implications.

"Oh yes," Python said amicably. His eyes were like bubbling poison again. "I just sent some men to fetch him from his cell. I will meet with them shortly."

Will couldn't respond.

Python continued, unfazed by his lack of response. "But you see what my problem is, don't you?"
"I do?" Will asked hoarsely. He couldn't think. Hatred unlike anything he'd ever felt pounded through his veins, blocking everything else out.

"Well my guests are expecting a spectacle aren't they? They were so excited. This was supposed to be the dawning of a new age." Python rolled his eyes, and held up a hand. "Well, obviously it still is, just not as soon as I told them." He reached up pick at his chin, upper lip curling. "My point is that I need to give them some sort of entertainment."

"So?" snapped Lou Ellen. "There are all sort of games going on up here. Chariot races. Discus. Let them watch those. Nothing else is needed." She looked strangely worried, but Will wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was for Apollo.

"But there's something about the arena that just gets them all hot and bothered," Python said smoothly. "I can't deny them that."

"Where are you going with this?" Will snapped. "Stop messing around. Leave the games for the monsters."

Python's eyes narrowed to slits. "Trust me, this is certainly no game, William," he said quietly. "I have decided to take you up on your offer." Will froze. "You will fight in your father's place, the day after tomorrow."

Will's throat was dry. "Why?"

"Well, like I said, partly for entertainment. But also because I think watching one of his children die will be good for Apollo. Perhaps it will make him reconsider his actions. I'll be sure to get him a good seat."

Will felt dizzy. His palms were sweaty. "It won't work," he whispered. "If you're looking for a show it won't work. I don't know how to fight with a sword. Or a bow. You'll be disappointed."

Python sighed. "Yes, I have heard what a disappointment you are. That's why I am going to give you a much easier opponent than Agamemnon here. Not too easy, mind. I still need you to die tragically by the end of it."

Now Will worried he really was going to pass out. "Who?" he asked shakily "Who am I supposed to fight? I demand to meet my opponent face to face!"

Python shook his head. "That's for me to know and you to find out. You'll meet him in the arena."

"This is insane," Lou Ellen spat. "You're a coward."

"I won't fight," Will said, shaking his head. "I won't. I'm a healer, I can't."

"You will," Python said firmly. "You cannot leave this city. You cannot send any messages to the outside world. Your precious little child of Hades can't even shadow travel in here. If you try to run, I will make sure that not only you but your friends as well, pay the price."

Will raised his head stubbornly. He felt incredibly warm all of a sudden. Come on, he thought desperately, how did I do it before? He tried to call for the power within him but felt nothing. What was wrong with him?

Why was he so weak?

"I won't run," he said through his teeth. "But I won't fight. Not for anyone's entertainment."
"Then you will die," Python said simply. "And you will confirm to your father just how much of a
disappointment you really are."

Will's breath halted. Blood pounded in his ears as he stared at Python, and the awful sneer that was
painted across his face. Come on, he thought desperately. But couldn't feel the power.

So instead he launched himself at Python with a wild cry.

Hands grabbed him almost immediately, hauling him backwards with enough force that he lost his
balance. The floor slammed out of his back. He heard shouting all around him, barely perceptible
over the pounding of his heart. He gasped feeling a dull pain in his chest. The wind had been
knocked out of him. He could see Lou Ellen's white face looking down him, the only one not
shouting at him, as he was hauled to his feet. Someone yanked his hands tightly behind his back.

Despite his struggling, Python stepped close to him. "I do believe I struck a nerve," Python
murmured. "Got some self-esteem issues, do we? That's unusual for a child of Apollo. I've always
found the lot of you to be stuck-up brats."

Will lunged at him again, desperately trying to break free of whoever was holding him. "I hate
you!" he shouted. He couldn't help himself. He felt as if he was losing his mind, the longer he
stood in Python's presence. "I may die here, but my dad won't. I'll make sure he gets out of here if
it's the last thing I ever do. He'll send you back to Tartarus where you belong!"

"Throw them out," Python ordered quietly. "I'm sick of listening to the sound of his voice. And
while you're at it, increase the security around Apollo. I don't need any last ditch efforts to save
him."

Agamemnon hauled Will from the room kicking and screaming. Once they were outside, he threw
Will to the ground. A soft thump and yelp meant that Lou Ellen had been thrown down beside him.
He lay there, dazed, until he heard the door slam behind him.

Jumping up, he tried to tear it open again, but it didn't budge.

"Dammit," Will shouted.

"Will-," Lou Ellen said, eyes wide and horrified. "It's okay. Please just-,

"None of this is okay," Will shouted, running a hand absently through his hair. His eyes burned and
a clot seemed to be forming in his throat. Dusk had descended during their talk with Python. The
small garden had succumbed in its shadow. The laurel trees rustled softly in the breeze, though
Will didn't find the sound comforting for once. It felt cold and dark and lonely.

Breaking into a run, he fled down the pathway towards the city, trying to put as much distance
between himself and Python as possible.

"Will," Lou Ellen called, running after him. "Will, wait up!"

Will continued running, feeling something like a sob rising into his throat. He felt closed in,
claustrophobic, despite being at the top of a mountain. Soon his lungs started to burn, and he was
forced to stop.

He placed his hands on his hips, taking a calming breath… and then promptly threw up in a bush.

"Will! Will!"
Will's eyes widened. There was another voice now, a familiar voice, but it made no sense to be hearing it now. He felt hands touch his back. Blinking hard, he looked up to see Nico di Angelo standing there, brows drawn together in concern.

"Where did you…" The taste of bile in his mouth almost made him gag again. "…come from?"


Will was surprised Nico wanted to get this close to him. Not only did the son of Hades not like physical contact but Will had just spewed the contents of his stomach everywhere.

When Will didn't answer, Nico wrapped Will's arm over his shoulders and hoisted him up. Normally he would have been ecstatic that Nico was willing to touch him, but now he felt…nothing. What had been fiery rage burning within him, was quickly giving way to a terrifying numbness.

The only comforting thing in the world right now was Nico. Even surrounded by monsters, terrible fear, and unbound uncertainty there was something about the son of Hades that could make him feel safe. Maybe it was because Nico never sugarcoated anything. Maybe it was because he was the most powerful demigod Will had ever met. Maybe it was because Will was slowly falling in love with him. What he did know was that Nico was terrifying, in the best way possible.

Luckily he was thinking clearly enough to not say any of that out loud. Instead his eyes fell to his waist.

"You got your sword back," he murmured. He twisted to look at Cecil. "And Lou's mirror. And…"

"Your bow." Cecil patted his jacket, under which Will's bow was partially concealed.

Will nodded his head gratefully. "Thanks."

"We found more than that," Nico said quietly. His voice lowered even more as they passed a group of monsters. "We found Apollo."

Will almost lost his footing. "You what?" he gasped, searching Nico's face. It was as unreadable as ever. "Where is he? How is he?"

"He-," Nico stopped short. Will saw the flash of hesitation and felt his heart sink. Nico didn't answer the question but instead said, "We should continue this conversation back in our room. I don't want anyone listening." He may have been stalling, or avoiding the question, but what he said made sense so Will decided not to complain. Yet.

They quickly hurried back to their hotel. The harpy girl's eyes brightened when she saw Cecil enter with them. She waved at him.

Despite the fact that Will believed their room would be the sight of Nico's imminent death, he couldn't help but feel relieved to be back there, away from monsters and prying eyes.

At least, he was relieved until he stepped inside. "They're back," he whispered.

Cecil frowned. "What's back?"

Will gulped. "The pillows." Sure enough all the beds had been remade with fresh, clean pillows.

"Did they go somewhere?" Nico asked suspiciously.
"Will tried to get rid of them," Lou Ellen explained tiredly. "The harpy girl must have brought them back."

Will groaned. Then he remembered what he had been excited about. He whirled on Nico and Cecil. "So you really found my dad? Is he alright?"

"He's… holding up," Cecil said tentatively, while at the same time Nico said bluntly, "He looks like schist."

Honestly it was what Will had expected to hear but it still hurt. "So um, why didn't you get him out?" He hated how accusatory the question sounded, but it was horrifying to know how close they had been and not helped his father.

"He's locked up," Nico said, sitting down on the edge of his bed. "He said the only thing that could open the cell was the key. I assume Python has it."

"Oh." The thought of having to steal keys from Python did not sound appealing to Will a single bit. "More keys. Wonderful. Hey, did you ask about what he meant in my dream?"

"We asked," Nico said slowly. "We also asked what the keys really are."


"Apparently so." Nico folded his legs up under himself, casting an anxious glance at Cecil as he did so. Will's brow furrowed. Whatever Apollo told them seemed to have shaken them up.

"Well what are they?"

Nico took a deep breath. "Um… I guess… blood. From the Gods. All twelve of them. And something else but he wouldn't say."

Will's mouth fell open. Now that he wasn't flipping out quite as much, he was able to appreciate the other horrors besides Python himself.

"Oh!" Lou Ellen gasped, eyes lighting up. "I can't believe I didn't think about that. It must be some sort of blood ritual."

They all stared at her.

Cecil raised his eyes to the ceiling. "A blood ritual? Why am I not surprised you know about that sort of thing? Is that what you do in your free time?"

Lou Ellen smirked, hazel eyes glinting. "Blood magic is a type of magic. Powerful, too. It makes perfect sense since the God's are all related in a way. Even to Tartarus, however distantly. It's so obvious now."

"So it's… what? A spell?" Will inquired.

"Maybe." Lou Ellen tucked a braid behind her ear. "It varies by what you're trying to do. It's all about control though."

"Control?" Nico asked with a deep frown.

The daughter of Hecate nodded. "It's called voodoo. You know in movies when some evil witch demands a lock of hair, or a vial of blood, or toenails. That kind of magic is dark though. It usually involves some sort of sacrifice."
"Do you think Python also wants the Gods' toenails?" Cecil muttered. Will couldn't tell if he was serious or not.

"I sincerely doubt it. But you get what I mean, right? You can use it to control others. Blood magic is powerful stuff. The Gods must have used their own blood to seal Tartarus away."

"But if you control others with their blood, how does that affect Tartarus?" Nico asked quickly. "It's not his blood the God's used. Python's after their blood."

Lou Ellen bit her lip thoughtfully. "Sometimes you can use a spell as an inverse. Of course it's best to use the recipient's own blood but that's not always an option. Tartarus is so powerful..." Lou Ellen trailed off, clearly thinking hard. When she spoke again it was mainly to herself; "If they drew upon their own bloodlines when it was invoked..." Lou Ellen sighed and shook her head. "I think it's possible, but I'm not an expert on this sort of magic."

Will couldn't blame her. Why anyone would want to know about blood rituals was beyond him.

"You know what this means though, right?" Lou Ellen asked suddenly, sitting up straighter.

"Erm, that you have creepy hobbies?" Cecil offered.

Lou Ellen shook her head, unimpressed. "It means that my mother must have done it. She's the only one with enough knowledge about this sort of stuff to be able to help Zeus do this."

Lou Ellen sighed. "We have more pressing things to deal with right now though," she said, giving Will a slight nudge. She began to tell them about their own adventure to see Python again.

"What?" Cecil gasped when he heard Will was supposed to fight. "This is insane! We can't go along with this, Will!"

"Tell me about it," Lou Ellen agreed darkly.

The only one who didn't say anything was Nico. Will could feel him watching him, but he didn't give him any inclination that he'd noticed. He didn't want his pity.

"We need to find a way to contact camp," said Cecil. "They should know about this. The Gods need to be warned."

"That'll be difficult," said Will quietly. "Python said we wouldn't be able to contact the outside world from the mountain. I think that includes Iris messages. And shadow travel."

"Wonderful," Nico muttered.

"My mirror might work," said Lou Ellen, picking up the object in question. She tilted it towards herself, meeting her reflection.

Nico looked surprised. "It sends Iris messages?"

Lou Ellen shook her head immediately. "Not an Iris message exactly. But it does send messages. It can be a little iffy making contact though." Lou Ellen cleared her throat, turning the mirror away from the others like she didn't want them to see it. "Er, give me a second. I, um, have to make sure it's safe."

Lou Ellen looked a little embarrassed. Cecil chuckled under his breath. Nico simply looked confused. Will realized he didn't know how her mirror worked.
Lou Ellen waved her hand over the mirror, murmuring some sort of short Latin incantation under her breath. Will made out Annabeth's name in the midst of it. Her brow furrowed as she stared at the surface of the mirror, waiting. After a few seconds she looked disappointed. "Ugh, that was a no go. Let me try Piper instead."

"The mirror can only reach other mirrors," Will explained to Nico as Piper repeated the incantation, this time saying Piper's name.

Nico looked puzzled still. "Okay? So why does she need to see if it's s-,

A terrified shriek sounded from the mirror. Lou Ellen cringed, looking apologetic. "Piper wait, it's me!" she squeaked at the mirror. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. This was the only way we could reach you guys." Lou Ellen looked up at Will, Cecil, and Nico. "Okay guys. It's safe. She's, like, dressed."

Will, Cecil, and Nico all moved quickly to hover over Lou Ellen's shoulder to see a very frazzled looking Piper gaping at them. She looked wildly over her shoulders like she was searching for where their reflections originated from.

"Oh my Gods, that is so weird," Piper gasped, eyes wide.

"Sorry Piper. It's just we can't send Iris messages or receive them right now. We're cut off."

Piper nodded, reaching up to flick her braid over her shoulder. She appeared to be standing in the girl's bathroom. It looked identical to the boy's.

"Ah. That explains a lot," she said weakly. "We've been trying to reach you guys for hours but the mist just kept spitting the drachma back out of at us."

"We have a lot to catch you up on," said Will, running a hand anxiously through his hair. "Can you go get the others?"

Piper winced. "Um sure. Could be a minute though."

"Why?"

"Because I have to convince them to come into the girls bathroom apparently. Wait here."

She left.

"Where would we go?" Cecil muttered rhetorically. "We're stuck in a mirror."

At one point another camper wandered in and saw them. Lou Ellen waved at her. She ran back out shrieking.

"Um, has it occurred to you guys that we're a little creepy?" Will muttered. Nico also looked deeply uncomfortable.

It didn't take as long Will worried it might for them to come back. "Um what the hell are we doing in here?" Will finally heard Percy's voice. "I'd feel more comfortable walking into the Underworld."

Annabeth, Kayla, Jason, and Percy stepped into view. Will was surprised to also see Kayla.

"Woah." Percy blinked at them. "You weren't kidding. They are literally creepin' around in the girls bathroom."
"This was all Lou's idea," Cecil said hurriedly. "She's weird like that."

Lou Ellen scowled. "I'm sorry, okay? We needed to speak with them! We have a lot to tell you guys."

"So do we!" Kayla interrupted. "We went to Olympus. The Gods have been attacked! It was a complete mess."

"Attacked?" Nico said, eyes widening. "What do mean?"

"As in someone broke in-," Percy dove into a horrifying story about a lockdown, an unhelpful security guard, and a guest appearance by Hermes who claimed they had been knocked out. In short it seemed no one had any clue what was happening and everyone was freaking out. Add me to that list, Will thought.

"Oh Gods," he muttered, looking to meet his friend's horrified gazes. Nico, Cecil, and Lou Ellen all looked equally disturbed by what Percy had told them. "This is really bad."

Annabeth frowned, her grey eyes stormy. "Do you guys have any idea what this means? Hermes wouldn't tell us anything. I hate to admit it but... we're all pretty lost by what's going on. It makes no sense."

"It's starting to," Will muttered glumly, looking over at Nico. He was the one who had spoken with Apollo; he could explain better than Will could.

Nico quickly launched into their own story, telling them everything Apollo had told them about the keys. He even mentioned some of Lou Ellen's speculations. Will fidgeted during his story, playing with an escaping thread on the moth eaten bedding. He felt sick again after hearing what Percy had said. If what he thought was true, that Python had achieved what Apollo believed was impossible... it was all over. Well, almost. He still didn't know what the "it" Python had mentioned was, but right now it seemed like their only hope.

Stunned silence fell as Nico finished telling their side of the story.

Jason looked like someone had struck him in the face. "Well if that's all true... it explains why Hermes acted like they couldn't be sure if something was stolen. Especially if they were all knocked out. Who could have done something like this?" He shook his head, adjusting the glasses on his nose. "What's to stop Python from raising Tartarus right this second?"

"He was searching for something else as well," Will said suddenly. "I overheard him. He was speaking to someone, but I couldn't see who. He sounded furious, like his plans had been screwed up, but also sort of... confused. He kept asking where something was. Also, apparently there's more to raising Tartarus than the blood, but Apollo wouldn't talk about it."

"At least we've got that going for us," Piper sighed. "Is there anything else you wanted to tell us?"

Will opened his mouth slowly, about to mention that Python had decided to have him fight in one of the games but stopped. He couldn't help but glance at his sister. Kayla had been silent for the most part, but Will could see the anguish on her face. It nearly broke his heart. Hearing what had happened to their father was no doubt devastating. Part of him wished the others hadn't told her and Austin what was going on, although he knew that was unfair. This was their father too. They deserved to know.

Perhaps she also deserved to know that her brother had been given a death sentence in a mere two days time, but Will couldn't bring himself to say those words aloud.
"How are you Kayla?" he asked instead, forcing a smile onto his face. It felt strange. "How is everyone?"

Kayla's blue eyes looked tired. Will knew that when he said 'everyone' she would know he meant their cabin. "We're all fine. Worried about you mainly. Are you okay?"

"I'm… fine," he managed to force out. Would this be the last time he would ever see his sister? Or Percy, Annabeth, Jason, or Piper? He pushed the thought from his mind, forcing himself to sound hopeful. "Hey, your taking good care of the infirmary for me, right?"

Kayla looked startled by the words. "Of course, Will. It'll be good as new when you get back."

Will tried to say, "Good," but his throat had something stuck in it. He cleared it and nodded instead. To his right he could feel Nico staring at him. He refused to look back.

"Take care of yourselves, guys," Jason said anxiously. "Let us know if there's anything else we can do."

Shortly after that Lou Ellen let the spell fade and the surface of her mirror returned to normal.

The rest of the night was rather relaxed. Nico sat cross legged on his bed and worked on sharpening his sword. Cecil tried flicking on the TV to see if it could get news channels. He received nothing but a whole lot of static. At one point he and Lou Ellen decided to wander down to the lobby. They returned ten minutes later with food. Most of it was junk and Will didn't particularly feel like eating anything but Lou Ellen glared at him until he choked down a couple of tasteless chips.

Mostly he found himself glancing over at Nico multiple times throughout the night, desperate to catch his eye, but the son of Hades kept his bowed. Will got the feeling he was trying to avoid speaking with him.

By the time midnight rolled around they had all gone to bed. Will knew he should try to get some sleep as well, but too many images circulated through his head. Python's cold gaze, his dad locked in the dark somewhere beneath the mountain, the keys forged of blood, the Gods scattering across the earth, trying to track down the thief… He recalled how Python had said earlier he was sending his men down to fetch Apollo even as he spoke to Will. It was unbearable to think about. He must have spent a good hour laying in bed, staring dully at the ceiling, and trying not to think about what might be happening to Apollo at that very moment…

The sun beat down on his skin, a warm breeze lapping at his shirt. Before him in a green field a group of children played. There were about a dozen or so of them. He kept his eyes fixed on one of them in particular, a girl. She wore a plain brown dress and sandals. Her blonde hair rippled down her back under the morning sun. He scratched a finger over his chin, watching her as she threw back her head and laughed at something the boy beside her had said. He frowned, watching the boy now too. He really couldn't understand what he saw in her.

They both knew who her parents were. She may have been young, but she was already beautiful. She was already dangerous.

His dream changed:

He could see Agnete, sitting cross-legged in the sand, beside a small fire. The flames flickered green and blue, trailing upwards towards the dark sky. It was nighttime. Will heard a whooshing sound and looked around to see the ocean sprawling behind him. He recognized the place he stood
almost immediately; the island of the Lotus Eaters. He and his friends had stood upon those same
shores only days ago.

Agnete looked directly into the flames of the fire, seeing something in their depths Will could not.

Her voice was hushed as she spoke. "I will find you," she whispered. Her green eyes held unbound
anguish. "I will save you, if it is the last thing I do. We will be together again."

"You cannot continue to do this to yourself, sister," came a second voice. Agnete jumped. Will
followed her gaze to see a slightly younger Aminta standing at the edge of the rainforest, a worried
frown on her face as she watched her older sister.

Agnete opened her mouth to respond-

But Will found himself back in the hotel room, covers twisted tightly around his body. He kicked
them off and sat up, rubbing a hand over his face. His dream may have been strange, but he was
thankful it hadn't been bad or terrifying for once. Glancing around he saw that Nico, Lou Ellen, and
Cecil were all still asleep in their beds. His gaze paused on the sleeping form of Nico, watching
him murmur softly in his sleep. With a sigh Will slid out of bed. There was no way he was falling
back asleep now.

Carefully he made his way to the door to the small porch and stepped outside.

He was met with a cool breeze that rose the hair on his arms. The street below was surprisingly
busy. A single flower box clung to the wood railing, potted with purple hyacinths. It was dark out,
the stars glittering high above the city like a reflection of the lights below. Will leaned on the
railing, propping himself up on his elbows. For a place swamped by monsters and decaying under
the wretched reign of Python, the city still held onto some of its former splendor. Once, his brother
Lee had mentioned something about coming here with their siblings as a sort of field-trip, if Chiron
would allow it. It seemed like a lifetime ago. So much had changed since then it made Will's heart
ache.

A creak sounded behind him, followed by soft footsteps. Somehow he was not surprised when
Nico moved to stand beside him.

"Can't sleep?" asked the son of Hades.

A tired smile drew up the corner of Will's mouth. "What else is new?" Will glanced over at Nico to
find the son of Hades watched him back, eyes as dark and guarded as ever. Will pursed his lips.
"Let me guess; you had another dream also."

"Not at all," Nico replied breezily. "Just you."

Will frowned at that. "What makes you think I had a dream?"

Nico shrugged and focused his attention on picking at the peeling wood railing.

"Nico..." Will narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You're not spying on me are you?"

"Don't flatter yourself." When Will continued to stare at him he dark haired boy let out a quick
breath. "Look, I'm just trying to keep an eye out."

Will shook his head in disbelief. "You're watching my dreams now?" The thought was almost
horrifying. He quickly wracked his brains, trying to recollect if he'd had any embarrassing dreams
recently.
"Ever since…" Nico hesitated. Dropping his gaze, he bit his lip softly. "Ever since that night on the island."

Will raised his eyebrows at that. That night on the island. The night they had kissed in the water? Will shot him a glance out of the corner of his eye. Neither one of them had mentioned it since the boat. Ever since then Will had been distracted by the necessity of survival. He hadn't had a moment to stop and think about it. But now, side by side with Nico with nothing but the darkened world for company, he felt something shift inside him.

"I see," Will said lightly. He longed to know what Nico was thinking right then, but the son of Hades had glanced away, hiding his face in the shadows.

"Did you understand any of your dream?"

Will thought of the little girl he had seen in the field, and of Agnete gazing into the green flames. He shook his head. "Not really. I think the little girl might have been Agnete but I'm not sure. I don't know how this relates to our quest."

Nico nodded slowly. "But what if it's-,

Will shook his head abruptly. "No. It's my turn to ask the questions."

Nico shot him a look. Will thought he might argue but slowly his expression relaxed. "I suppose that's alright."

"How's your shoulder?"

Nico grew still. His eyes flickered down briefly towards where Will knew the hand print had been seared into his flesh. "It's… fine. It doesn't hurt that much if that's what you mean."

"Let me see," Will said calmly. When Nico had no reaction he added, "Doctor's orders, Death Boy."

"It's fine, Will," Nico muttered unhappily, but he slipped an arm out of his aviator jacket and reached up to pull down the neck of his shirt. It wasn't enough to uncover the entire mark, but Will would take what he could get. Slowly, in case Nico was feeling flighty about the physical contact, he reached up and rested his hand just above the burn, a hairsbreadth away from Nico's skin. Focusing, he let warmth flow through his fingertips. Nico shivered slightly, but to his credit did not flinch away.

However when Will removed his hand again, the mark remained there, entirely unchanged.

Will's stomach flipped.

Seeing the look on his face, Nico said, "Tartarus did this to me, Will. I don't think it's going to be that easy to heal."

Will didn't entirely buy that though. Was something wrong with him? Why wouldn't his powers work? He needed to get to the bottom of it.

His gaze fell upon the hyacinth flowers in the flower box.

The blooms had wilted in the chilly air. Will reached out to touch one, letting warmth flow through his fingers again. While his powers were nothing compared to the children of Demeter's back at camp, and he was better suited at healing people, occasionally he'd found he could bring plants
back to life as well, as long as it was only warmth or sunlight that was required.

The purple petals perked up under the glow of his palm.

Satisfied, Will lowered his hand. A second later queasiness passed through him. He clenched his hand into a fist.

Nico had remained silent as he watched Will, but now he spoke; "You know you really shouldn't do that."

"Do what?" Will murmured, pressing his lips together. He breathed deeply through his nose. What was wrong with him? This was simple magic! He may have sucked as a musician or a warrior but he'd been manipulating light and heat since birth.

Nico looked vaguely frustrated like he was tired of explaining it to Will. "Apollo's power is flowing through you right now. It's dangerous for you to use it. It's too much of a physical strain. You could hurt yourself."

"Nico I've been doing that since birth," Will said stubbornly, deciding to neglect mentioning how he now felt like he was going to puke on the hyacinths. He'd had enough of throwing up on innocent plants for one day.

Nico fell silent, watching the street below. "I don't like any of this," he said softly.

Will almost laughed. "I'd be concerned if you did like it. This place is supposed to be a haven for the arts. Games, music, poetry, archery. Python's turned it into a nesting ground for monsters."

Nico shot him a concerned look. "Actually I was talking about you being forced to fight in the arena. I hate to say it but you're terrible with a sword. You'll be killed instantly."

"You know, your bedside manner is truly abysmal, Nico," Will remarked dryly. "You're supposed to at least pretend you think there's hope."

Nico looked at him, stone-faced. "I'm just keeping it real Solace. And I do think there's hope. It just doesn't include you being armed with any deadly weapons." Nico frowned. "Not that they'd be that deadly in your hands."

Will actually laughed at that. As much as he was loathe to admit it, Nico had a point. "Believe me, I don't want to fight. It's not exactly like I have a choice. I don't want Python coming after any of you guys either. This is between me and him. Besides, I'm mainly worried about my dad." Will broke off with a soft wince. "You don't think Python will actually make him watch, do you? I don't know if I could bear that."

Nico simply stared at him, face dark and unreadable. It was clear he thought Python would follow through with any threats he made.

Will cleared his throat, looking down at his hands. "Look, I don't know what's going to happen in the next few days, but you'll get Apollo out right? No matter what happens to me, you have to save him. Promise me."

Nico's eyes had regained that same look Will had noticed when he first met him, like broken glass. "Don't talk like that, Will," he said quietly. "Apollo's going to be just fine… because you are going to save him."

Will really wanted to believe those words, but ever since they'd left on this quest he'd found himself
starting to become more of a realist. "I appreciate you trying to be all optimistic for once Death Boy, but right now I really just need to know that this wasn't all for nothing. Promise me you'll save my father, if for some reason I… can't."

Nico's expression was as dark as night. "You've been asking me to make a lot of promises lately, Solace."

"Please?"

Nico stared at the road below them for a long moment. Eventually he shook his head. "No. You're not allowed to talk like that. You'll save him yourself." Tendrils of darkness were beginning to leak off of the dark haired boy. Will watched as the hyacinth shrub he'd recently helped began to shrivel up.

He reached out quickly and grabbed Nico's hands. They were cold as ice. Nico jumped at the contact but didn't immediately pull away, though he shot Will a look of warning. "What are you doing?"

"You're upset." Will motioned to the flowers. "You're killing the indigenous flora."

Nico cocked his head. "Upset? Gee, I wonder why?" To Will's disappointment, he carefully extracted his hands from the son of Apollo's. He then folded them on his lap, carefully out of reach. "You know, most people would consider that all the more reason to stay away."

"I'm not most people."

Nico let out a pent up breath. "Yeah, I've figured that out by now."

Will watched as he began twisting his ring. He cleared his throat. "Then I hope you also know I'm not afraid of you. Or your powers."

"That is…" Nico hesitated, pausing in the midst of turning his ring to look down at his hands like he didn't quite trust himself. "A very dangerous thing for you to say."

A lock of raven hair had fallen over his eyes when he looked down, blocking his eyes from Will's view. Will watched him silently for a moment, tracing the profile of his nose and mouth, committing them to memory. His impulses got the best of him. Gently he reached out and brushed the strand away from Nico's face. Nico tensed at the contact, waiting. But when Will did not immediately withdraw his hand, he shifted away from his touch.

Will couldn't help but feel a bite of disappointment gnaw at his chest. Of course he knew Nico didn't like physical contact, but he'd seemed to have grown more accepting of it since Will had met him. A couple of nights ago, under stars very much the same as these, they had even kissed. Will would never be able to erase the feeling of his lips on his, nor did he want to. It had been pure, unadulterated bliss.

Hadin't they gotten past this?

Nico wouldn't meet his eyes. "Will," he said softly, wetting his lips. The corners of his mouth turned down sharply. His looked sad. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You shouldn't-," Nico stammered to a halt, taking a deep breath. His gaze remained fixed on the city that sprawled beneath them as he spoke. "You're not thinking clearly."
Will frowned. "My thinking is perfectly clear."

Nico pressed his lips together, looking away. "Hm."

"What's wrong?" Will pressed. A thought occurred to him suddenly; Nico hadn't withdrawn until Will had tried to get close to him. The realization was rather depressing. "Do you hate it that much when I touch you?"

"It's… not that."

"Then what?" Will prompted. "Is it… about the kiss?"

Nico almost cringed. Will watched in secret delight as he flushed pink. He didn't really understand the reaction. Maybe it was because Will was simply more outgoing than most, but he couldn't fathom how some people found simple things like a kiss awkward or embarrassing to talk about. Maybe he'd just had a lot of practice having to talk about awkward things with his patients since he was a healer.

Or maybe it was just Nico.

Is it really that hard for you to just tell me what you're thinking?" Will asked him quietly. "You know, clinical studies show that opening up to people is a key aspect in developing healthy relationships. I'm just trying to get closer to you."

Nico sighed. "You shouldn't want to get close to me at all."

Will rolled his eyes. "I beg to differ. Consorting with unique persons is considered enriching and-.,"

"Unique," Nico interrupted with a harsh laugh. "That's a exceedingly nice way to put it."

"You are nice." Will sighed. "If there's something you want to say Nico, you're going to have to come out and say it. I'm not good at reading people."

Nico frowned. "You are good at reading people though."

"Others, yes," Will relented. "But not you. What's going on with you?"

Nico chewed his lip, thinking hard. "You wouldn't understand."

Will rolled his eyes. "Maybe not. I don't understand a lot of things you do. But why don't you give it a try."

Nico breathed out sharply. "Okay. Um… where do I start?" He shot Will a look, searching his face. For what, Will didn't know. "Tell me again; why did you… kiss me?"

Will smirked. "I already told you. It seemed like-,

"The thing to do at the time?" Nico asked heavily. He shook his head, chewing his lip. "But that's it, isn't it? The moment's passed."

Will's breath caught. Passed? What did Nico mean? "I wouldn't say it's over…" Will muttered nervously. He didn't like where this was going.

"I know why you did it at the time. It's just…" Nico looked down at the palms of his hands. He began twisting his ring again. "You can't do it again."
Will felt like he'd been slapped. He blinked. "I... Um, okay." He had no idea where this was coming from or what to say. So it turned out Nico didn't ever want to kiss him again? Will found the realization disappointing beyond words. Then he realized something else. "Wait. You just said you knew why I did it at the time. What the hell is that supposed to mean?"


Will's heart skipped a beat. Surely that meant Nico felt something towards him then? "Then... why don't you want to... do it again?" His face grew hot at the words. Okay, so maybe he could appreciate it was a little nerve-racking talking about such things.

Nico swallowed hard. "Because... I don't want you to regret it," he said hoarsely.

"I don't regret it," Will exclaimed immediately. Regret kissing Nico? That was laughable. "Maybe I read it wrong, but it didn't really seem like you were complaining at the time either, you know."

Will shook his head. "So where exactly are you trying to go with this?"

"I-," Nico flushed pink and refused to meet Will's gaze. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" Will exclaimed. "Gods, you're so confusing. Did you not like it?"

"I wouldn't say that." If it was possible he turned even redder "It's just..."

"What?"

"I'm me," Nico said flatly. "You're you."

Will stared at him. "Um yeah, it's called sentient autonomy, Nico. Different people are different. It's one of the greatest things about people."

Nico rolled his eyes. "That is not what I meant, Solace. I'm the son of Hades. You just don't seem to get that."

Will supposed that much, at least, was true. "So?"

Nico scowled. "So we are complete opposites. You're a son of Apollo. You're a healer, you save lives. I've killed people. And not just monsters. I've been to Tartarus, Will. There's no coming back from that."

Will blinked. "Is this you're weird way of telling me you have baggage?"

Nico raised his eyebrows. "In a way, yes. I'm from the forties, Will. When I'm not struggling to get through present day, I'm in the Underworld working with ghosts. I have nightmares from the stuff I do. I can barely stand having to spend time with myself." Nico bit his lip. "Believe me when I say you don't want to get close to me. You'll regret it."

"I don't think that's possible," Will muttered. "I could never regret knowing you. I care about you. A lot. Possibly... more than you think." Will blushed at the admission.

Nico closed his eyes. "Please don't say that, Will."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."
Will's heart fluttered in his chest. "Do you-," He hesitated, pushing the feeling of butterflies down in his stomach. The next words were hard to get out. "Do you not feel the same way?"

It took forever and a day for Nico to answer, and it was only once he had looked away so Will couldn't see his face that he did.

"No, I don't."

Will felt like the wind had been knocked out of him again. How could he have read it all so wrong? He swallowed hard, looking down at his hands, more to avoid having to look at Nico than anything. His voice came out as a soft whisper. "I just thought…” He trailed off weakly. He had no idea how to salvage what was left of this sinking ship.

Everything around him was falling to pieces.

And why couldn't Nico just look at him?

When Nico finally spoke his voice sounded soft and uneven. "I guess you thought wrong."

Before Will could begin to think of a response to that, the son of Hades pushed himself back from the railing, heading towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Will asked around the lump in his throat.

Nico didn't turn around. "Inside. You should try to get some sleep. We'll be no help to Apollo if we're exhausted." The door shut clicked behind him, leaving Will alone out on the patio and feeling more than a little heartsick.
The next morning Will did not wake Nico up early like he normally did. Instead when Nico's eyes finally cracked open it was to discover the sun was already well on its way into the sky and his three friends were awake, discussing plans quietly. Nico tried not to be annoyed by the fact that they had chosen to let him sleep.

"Nico, you up?" Cecil asked. Something landed lightly at the foot of Nico's bed with a crinkle. A bag of Doritos. Breakfast of champions. Nico pushed himself up, blowing hair out of his face.

"Don't make that face, Will," Lou Ellen said easily. "No one ever died from having chips for breakfast."

"Wanna bet?" Will muttered half-heartedly. He raised his hand to conceal a yawn. For some inconceivable reason Nico found himself to be having some trouble meeting the son of Apollo's eyes. After last night he wasn't sure what he would see in them, but he doubted it was anything good. It felt as though it had all been an unpleasant, but necessary, dream.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Will said we should let you sleep." Lou Ellen pursed her lips. Nico fought the urge to glance at the son of Apollo. "Though if you ask me, he's the one who should be sleeping. You look exhausted, Will."

Nico couldn't help himself.

Lou Ellen's assessment was pretty accurate. Although the burns Will had attained were almost completely healed by now, his blue eyes were overcast, unlike the clear sky blue they normally were. His blonde hair was a characteristically disheveled mess. Strangely the sight still managed to make Nico's heart flutter. That's enough, Nico admonished himself. You've had crushes before. Well, a crush. You know how well that played out in the end. You are not going to do that to yourself again.

The logic seemed sound to his brain but apparently his heart still needed a reminder. He'd burned that bridge last night. He had known, or at least suspected, for a while where these feeling he harbored for the son of Apollo might be leading, but he'd done nothing about them. It wasn't up until a couple days ago when Will had kissed him, that Nico had been forced to confront them. But that had also been a couple of days ago.

That bothered Nico. What exactly had changed since that night that had forced Nico to push him away? Why had he felt the desperate need to distance himself from Will last night? Nico wasn't sure.

And now Will wouldn't even look at him.

Nico fought the urge to cover his face with his hands. He wanted to scream or tear his hair out. What was wrong with him? Was he really so screwed up that he would desperately wish for years for someone to simply notice him, only to then actually stumble upon such a person but purposefully push them away?
Well apparently yes.

Nico was beginning to think Tartarus really had driven him insane and he just hadn't realized it until now. Did he regret what he said last night? Well, no. But he supposed he didn't have to like it. It had been for his own good. And Will's too.

"-right Nico?"

Nico blinked, realizing he had simply been staring at Will for the past minute or so, while the rest of them continued talking. Nico cleared his throat and looked down. "Um, what?"

"I was saying we need to get Apollo out today." Lou Ellen said urgently. She perched her mirror upright on the dresser upon its handle and spun it like a top. "We can't stick around until tomorrow, not if Python's going to make Will fight to the death in some twisted spectacle of his." Taking a deep breath, she leaned back against the dresser. "Staying here until then is suicide."

Cecil grimaced, his brown eyes troubled. "Apollo said we needed the key to get him out of his cell. Whatever plan we come up with had better not involve me having to pickpocket Python."

"Apollo also said he could do it if he had his powers," Nico reminded them. "If we can return them to him he should be able to free himself." Of course that would require Will coming down to the dungeon with them this time. Nico wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Apollo or Will?" asked Lou Ellen, with a frown.

Nico shrugged. "I don't know. Either, I guess."

Cecil closed his eyes in frustration. "Maybe we could have done that yesterday, but didn't Python say he was increasing security around Apollo's cell? It'll be tricky getting down there again."

"We have to try." Will looked determined. He reached up to anxiously run a hand through his hair. The movement tugged up the hem of his t-shirt very slightly, revealing a sliver of the tanned skin of his stomach. Nico quickly looked away.

Just what the hell was wrong with him? He may have done his best to push Will away but his brain apparently hadn't gotten the memo. How annoying.

"Are you sure you want to go down there Will?" Nico asked slowly. "I know you don't like the dark-"

"I survived our little trek through the Underworld didn't I?" Will interrupted quickly. Nico supposed this was true; Will was a lot braver than he gave him credit for.

For the briefest of seconds, Will's eyes met his. The son of Hades glanced down almost immediately, but not before he saw the storm of conflicting emotions roiling in their depths.

Will sighed. "I'll be fine. It's not like Apollo has a choice, being locked down there. Neither do I. I won't leave him down there a second longer than I have to. Especially not after what Python said yesterday."

"What about that girl?" Cecil asked suddenly. "We can't just abandon her down there. We need to help her too."

Lou Ellen's brow furrowed. "You really have no idea who she was?"
"No clue," Nico answered honestly. "But she knew who I was."

"Perhaps you've simply made a name for yourself," Cecil suggested. Nico couldn't tell if he was joking or not. "The big, bad son of Hades and all. Maybe you're famous."

Nico rolled his eyes. "No way. I don't know how she knew who I was but I plan to find out."

Will nodded slowly. "Fine. We have an even bigger problem now though. What about the blood that was stolen from the Gods? Assuming that it was stolen we need to take it back. Or destroy it. But we certainly can't let Python hold onto it."

"That's a big if," Cecil said quickly. "You were told Python's plan went wrong; what if he didn't get anything?"

"It doesn't make sense," Lou Ellen agreed. "Apollo said part of the key to unlocking Tartarus was the blood of all twelve Olympians; the gods are acting like they're sure it's already been taken; but if it has, Python's done nothing and still seems to be searching for something." She stated all of the facts like she hoped it would reveal something they had missed. "I just don't get what Python's waiting for."

"Well it sounds like he needs to find out another part of the plan from Apollo first," Nico interjected. "It sounds like Apollo just gave him the ingredients to this spell he needs to do. He may not actually know how to complete it. Maybe that's what he's trying to figure out now."

"But he's still searching for something," Will said. "What could that be? Apollo didn't mention anything else?"

"No."

Will looked strained.

The four of them paced past the guards office again, clearing it by a good hundred feet before stopping between a Chipotle (apparently even a forgotten city was not exempt from the hottest new trends in chain-restaurants) and a Forever 21 (because even monsters needed to look fashionable as they ripped people's throats out).

Python hadn't been messing around when he'd ordered more security be put around Apollo. Nico couldn't blame him. The office now contained at least six guards, all fully armed. Nico suspected there were a lot more inside as well.

"How'd you guys get in before?" Will asked incredulously. "This looks impossible."

Nico tapped his finger against the hilt of his sword nervously. "There weren't so many guards. We got in easily. I don't think they were expecting anyone to break in." And now they were. Great. It didn't help that news of Will fighting in the tournament tomorrow instead of Apollo seemed to have spread overnight. Everywhere he looked, monsters bared their teeth at them, glaring at the son of Apollo like he had ruined their fun.

"Do you think we can sneak by this time?" Will looked strained.

Cecil chewed his lip, looking around at their surroundings. "Maybe I can cause some sort of distraction and you can sneak in."

The idea had potential. "What kind of distraction?" Nico asked.

Cecil smirked. "I could rob a place. The guards might chase me. Or I'll get arrested and sent to
monster jail."

Lou Ellen scrunched up her nose. "That's a stupid plan. You are not robbing Forever 21."

"Well can you think of a better plan?" he retorted.

"A plan for what?"

Nico couldn't help but jump. He reached to grasp the hilt of his sword but managed to stop himself. Lou Ellen had wrapped the mist around them, just enough to conceal their weapons. It seemed to be working so far but Nico didn't want to do anything to potentially jeopardize it.

Hybris tutted like a disapproving mother. "I certainly hope you four aren't terrorizing the city." He eyed Will coldly. "Enjoying your final day in the sun, son of Apollo? I'm not surprised. I hear the Underworld isn't very sunny."

"Shut up," Nico snarled. He wondered how much trouble they would be in if he simply drew his sword and ran Hybris through with it right where he stood. It sounded satisfying.

Hybris raised his eyebrows. "Oh? Then what exactly are you doing skulking around out here. The four of you have passed by a grand total of five times over the last hour. I refuse to think you are that interested in fast-food."

That wasn't entirely true; it was lunchtime, Nico was hungry, and frankly a burrito bowl with extra spicy salsa sounded delicious. Saying so probably wouldn't help their situation though.

"No," Will stammered, heart leaping into his throat. "No, we were just, um, sightseeing."

Hybris scowled. "Well in that case would you like to see our electroshock therapy room? If you're lucky I might even let you try it out yourselves."

"That's barbaric," Will gasped immediately. "That's not even real medicine. When I was in first grade I wrote a research paper on outdated, medieval medical practices and why they had were determined completely ineffective-"

Nico smacked his arm to shut him up.

Hybris stared at Will. "Really? I think they would do wonders for you."

"We weren't doing anything," Nico said angrily. "We were just-,

"-looking for me," concluded a familiar voice. Nico turned to find a welcoming sight.

Aminta strode towards them, green eyes burning. Agnete followed in her footsteps, though with notable hesitation. "I will take these demigod's from here, Commander."

Hybris scowled. "I thought you told Python you didn't want anything to do with them anymore?"

"I did say that," Aminta allowed, inclining her head. "But the more I think about it I realize I didn't properly punish them before for invading my island. They have been very naughty children." Her plant-green eyes drifted over the four demigods, a smirk twisting at her lips. "Come along."

"Hold on just a second, lady," Hybris growled, reaching out to roughly grab Aminta's arm. Her eyes narrowed at the contact. "I overheard these kids discussing some sort of distraction. They clearly have shady ulterior motives and should be punished with utmost severity."
Agnete smiled thinly at that. "I see how it is. Leave it to us, Commander. We Lotus Eaters are renowned for our whimsical and opprobrious punishments."

"Fine." Hybris huffed, folding his arms. Aminta gripped Will and Cecil by the arms and led them away with Hybris yelling after them; "But make sure you give them a proper beating! I want to count the lash marks on their scrawny backs next time I see them!"

"Will do!" Agnete called cheerfully.

Will cast the sisters an uneasy but grateful look as they walked. "Thanks for that. We-;"

"You four are right band of dimwits, aren't you?" Agnete snapped, interrupting him. "We should beat you. You'd deserve it for being so stupid. What on earth were you hoping to accomplish back there?"

"None of your business," Lou Ellen shot back.

Agnete chuckled softly. "So ungrateful, Stinky."

Lou Ellen scowled and Aminta shot her sister a vaguely alarmed look. "I don't think she's smells bad."

Agnete sighed. "Sister, you are no fun." With a shake of her head which sent waves of shiny blonde hair rippling down her back she asked, "Now if you don't mind me asking again; what in the Gods' names do you four fools think you were doing?"

"I'm not going to stand by and wait for Python to kill my dad," Will grumbled. He kicked moodily at a rock in his path. "I can't stand it."

"It's alright, Sweetie," said Agnete. "He'll be dead soon enough. Then you won't have to."

"Sister," Aminta intoned quietly. "Be kind. He could lose his father. You know what it is like to lose someone."

Agnete didn't seem to appreciate the comment. She shot her younger sister an unimpressed glare. "Yes, I do. It makes you stronger."

"Losing people you love doesn't make you stronger," Aminta commented. "Just colder."

Nico shot the both of them a look. Honestly he couldn't imagine Agnete loving anyone at all. Except maybe her sister. She was too changeable, too hot-headed. Still, he wondered who she had lost. Had it been recent? Agnete didn't look more than sixteen or seventeen but that helped very little; she was probably hundreds of years old.

"Where are we going?" Lou Ellen asked sharply, frowning at their surroundings. Nico realized they had taken an unfamiliar turn through the streets.

"To my quarters," Aminta informed them. "We can speak privately there."

Aminta's quarters turned out to be far nicer than their dingy hotel room. While theirs looked like the possible setting for a bad horror-movie about pillows, Aminta's was fresh, clean, and spacious, more like a hotel suite than a room.

She even offered them each some sort of clear-ish drink.

"Agnete suggested I try strange mortal beverage," Aminta explained. "It is absolutely delicious."
Apparently it is made from lemons."

Nico did try it. It was lemonade.

After motioning for them to take seats upon the black leather sofa Aminta asked, "Care to explain how you four got your weapons back?" Seeing their looks of surprise she explained; "Agnete is quite adept at controlling the mist. She saw them on you immediately."

"Oh," Cecil said, tapping his foot nervously. "We just, um, found them-,

"You mean you stole them?" Agnete gave a tinkling laugh. "That's just brilliant. I can't believe you chose to help them get in here, Aminta. Of all the foolish things…" She let the rest of the statement go unsaid.

"I told you," Aminta interrupted. "It was a good plan. It benefitted us all. But I am sorry it did not work out. I take it you still plan to rescue your father, Will?"

Nico scowled. "Why should we tell you? You pledged your allegiance to Python. We can't trust you anymore."

"Perhaps not," Aminta allowed. "But you can with this. I assure you I am only doing this for my people. I hold no love for Python, nor do want to see Apollo die. Or you Will."

Will's face fell. "You heard?"

"Everyone heard, Sweetie," Agnete answered. "Have't you noticed all the attention you've been getting today? I was there late last night when Python made the announcement. These people, these monsters-," she waved her hand towards the window, "have been thirsting for blood for close to a week now, listening as Python boasted his grand plans of finishing Apollo. You should have heard them howl last night when they discovered it wouldn't be happening nearly as soon as they thought. Instead all they're going to get is your pathetic demise. I thought there'd be rioting in the streets."

Agnete shook her head. "Python had best be careful tomorrow. He will need a lot of guards to keep this crowd under control."

"You think they'd actually attack him?" Cecil asked, alarmed.

"Python, no. But Apollo? Maybe. Especially since he is virtually helpless as a mortal. Like I said, they're bloodthirsty."

Cecil looked down thoughtfully at that. He didn't say anything else.

Will set his lemonade down on the table with a loud clunk. "Are you kidding me? This is a complete disaster. If you two hadn't interfered we could be freeing Apollo right now-,

"Don't flatter yourself," Agnete snapped. "You'd be locked up or getting tortured. I know Hybris. He wasn't kidding about the electroshock. It's his favorite pastime."

"Hold on." Aminta held up her hand, narrowing her eyes at Will. "Does this mean you actually know where Apollo is being held?"

Will froze. His eyes flickered over to his friends in a half-glance.

Lou Ellen made the judgement call. "We do," she said carefully. She gave Agnete a hard look.
"But so do you right?"

"I know no such thing," Agnete said immediately. "Python only shares such information with his most trusted advisors."

Nico was surprised at that. Narrowing his eyes he asked testily, "But you do know what's been stolen, don't you?"

Agnete looked like she'd swallowed a lemon. "I know he is searching for something important," she said carefully. "But I do not know what that is."

Nico couldn't help but feel disappointed. He'd hoped she would know what this final missing piece, besides the Gods' blood, might be. Apparently Agnete was not quite as valuable to Python as he had thought.

"I had a dream about you," Will interjected suddenly. "Last night."

Agnete didn't look impressed. "Oh?"

Will nodded. "It looked like it was in the past. I saw you back on your island and you were speaking into these flames… You-" he hesitated, clearly unsure if he should go on. "You promised you would find someone and save them."

Agnete looked perfectly expressionless until the last bit. Her lips parted softly in surprise. Almost as fast she sealed them back together and her eyes sparked with anger. "Forget it," she snapped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Aminta frowned at her sister. "I think I remember that," she said softly. "It was after you lost, oh, what was his name? That boy you loved-"

"Be quiet," Agnete hissed at her sister. Her face had turned ghost-like. "And do not bring it up again."

"But it could be important," Aminta insisted, searching Agnete's face. "Children of Apollo often have prophetic or unusual dreams. Surely there must be a reason for what he saw." Her expression softened slightly as she watched her sister. Her eyes widened. "Unless… do not tell me you are still not over him?"

"Of course I am," Agnete snapped. Taking a deep breath she forced her voice calm again. Crossing her arms, she glared at Will. "I don't suppose you heard anything… else… in your dreams, child?"

Will shook his head. "No. Just that."

Agnete stared at him for a second like she thought he might be lying. Finally her expression cleared. "Oh. Well, that is good I suppose. I don't know what you want me to say. Yes, I lost someone very dear to me many years ago. I am over it. I've moved on."

Will looked disappointed. "Oh. Okay. I just hoped it might be something more."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Agnete said coldly.

"This is not important," Aminta said suddenly. "You four must believe me when I say it is too dangerous to try to break Apollo out of his prison. It cannot be done."

Will's eyes widened. "But-"
"I think she's right, Will," Cecil said slowly, thinking hard. "We can't just break him out in broad daylight. But I was also right; we do need a distraction."

Lou Ellen frowned at the son of Hermes. "Why does it sound like you're coming up with another one of your crazy plans? I hope it doesn't involve robbing any stores."

"It doesn't," Cecil promised. "But it is dangerous. Especially for Will. And it will require us to wait until tomorrow."

Nico already didn't like the sound of this. Dangerous for Will? Hell no, this plan sounded terrible.

Will spoke up before he could; "But my dad-,

"Will have to hold up one more day," Cecil finished. "Aminta's right; even if we did manage to break him out today, then what? Python said there are still wards all over this place. We would have to escape through hordes of monsters and it's not like the sight of Apollo with us would be completely inconspicuous. We'll need something to big for these monsters to focus their attention on."

Nico could tell Will didn't like it. He didn't like where this plan was going either. If he was right and Cecil was hoping to use the tournament tomorrow as a distraction…

Will looked determined however. "Alright. Count me in. If it will save my dad, I'll do it."

A few hours later the four of them sat together in their hotel room. They had reviewed their new plan over and over but it still didn't sit well with Nico. There didn't seem to be a whole lot he could do about it though.

"Where are you going?" Lou Ellen's voice drew Nico from his thoughts. He followed her gaze to the door, where Will stood with his hand upon the knob.

Will gave a small shrug. "Out."

"Like hell you are," Nico snapped, standing up quickly. "It's too dangerous."

"No one's going to attack me," Will told him tiredly. "It sounds like Python's made it clear I'm too important." His face twisted at the words. "I just need some space to think."

"We'll come with you," Cecil offered immediately.

Will shook his head. "Actually I kind of just wanted a moment alone. No offense."

"Fine," Nico muttered reluctantly. "But it's better than you going somewhere alone. Someone has to save your ass if you get attacked."

Will's expression was unreadable but Nico was almost certain he was going to complain again. But then, to his surprise, he sighed resignedly. "Fine. Whatever. Let's go. We'll be right back," he told
Relieved that he hadn't had to fight much to get what he wanted, Nico trailed Will out the door.

"Do you even know where you're going?" Nico demanded as best he could. Will's legs were longer and he'd set a quick pace. "Or are we wandering for no apparent reason?"

"I'm not wandering."

Nico scowled when Will did not slow down or say anything else. "Where are we going then? Do you have a death wish? These monsters aren't supposed to attack you but, you know, they're monsters."

Will raised his eyes to the sky. "I thought you said you were going to be quiet?"

"I thought you we're smarter than this," Nico snapped. He shivered and pulled his aviator jacket tightly around himself. Although the sun was out, the air was brisk and provided little warmth.

"Gods, Nico," Will groaned. "Why did you come if you're just going to insult me and complain?"

"I'm not insulting you," Nico muttered. "I just wish you wouldn't risk your life needlessly. Having you fight tomorrow is bad enough. Carry on like this and you might not even make it until then."

Will gave him a look. "You know you're not really helping bolster my confidence. Are you really that concerned about tomorrow?"

"Of course I am!" Nico exclaimed.

His raised proclamation drew the attention of a telekhine, which hissed at him. Nico held out his palm towards it and a skeletal hands sprang from the earth, dislodging the cobblestones.

"Nico!" Will's hand closed around his arm, pushing it down. The telekhine gave a rasping squeak and scampered away. "Calm down."

Nico didn't feel like calming down at all. "This is stupid, Solace!"

"I don't care what you think, di Angelo!" Will lowered his voice so only Nico could hear. "I already know you hate the plan. But if there's even the slightest chance it could help save my dad, I'm willing to risk it."

"But--"

"And stop trying to pick a fight."

Nico opened his mouth to shout at Will that he wasn't trying to pick a fight… but closed it again, looking away. Once more it appeared their arguing had managed to draw a small crowd of onlookers.

"I'm not trying to pick a fight," he muttered unhappily.

"Uh-huh."

It was then that Nico noticed where they were. They had passed by the same place only yesterday on their climb to the throne room. To his right, down the hillside were those ruins again. Will made a beeline for them. After getting past his surprise, Nico hurried after him.
Delphyne hadn't moved much since yesterday. Not that she could with the chains binding her legs and neck. Nico wasn't sure how he felt about approaching an actual, live dragon (as opposed to Festus), even one tied up, but Will didn't appear to share his doubts.

The dragon's head turned slowly towards them as they approached, chains dragging heavily across the grass where she lay. Like yesterday, some of the monsters had stopped to gawk at the beast. Apparently they had never seen a dragon either.

"Get out of here!" Will shouted at them. His blue eyes burned with anger. The monsters didn't seem impressed by his order.

One of them bared its teeth at him, a growl twisting from its throat. "We don't take orders from meals. You're nothing but a dead man walking, child of Apollo."

The monster yelped suddenly, as the ground beneath its feet trembled, splitting apart at the seams. Bits of dirt, rock, and grass fell into the chasm, even as the first piece of bone sprouted from the dirt. They began to knit themselves together. The already brisk air dropped another ten degrees.

"Leave," Nico said, deathly calm.

The monsters scattered.

Will's eyes met Nico's briefly in a look of gratitude. The son of Apollo knelt by the dragon.


"She won't hurt me," Will answered. Carefully, he reached his hand out. The dragon watched him with her ancient eyes, calculative. Ever so slowly, she stretched out her neck, brushing the tip of her snout against Will's palm. She snorted softly, sending a gust of hot air against his hand. The air simmered from the heat. For a second Nico worried that Will was about to get burned. Then he remembered Will was all but immune to that sort of heat.

Will let out a shaky breath. "I can't believe he did this," he murmured to himself. "Python's going to pay. I swear it. I'm going to heal you," he told the dragon softly. "I need to see your wing."

The dragon beheld the son of Apollo with her deep golden eyes. Their depths seemed to flicker and burn with heat. Nico found them uncomfortable to meet. Will didn't seem to have the same problem. He gazed at the dragon for a long moment. All of a sudden he shuddered and closed his eyes.

"Will?" Nico gazed suspiciously at the pair of them.

Will shook his head, eyes unfocused. "I thought I just saw… never mind. Forget it."

Nico frowned at that. A moment later he had lost the opportunity to ask as the dragon gently extended her snapped wing as best she could. Will winced when he looked at the wound.

"Hmm. Broken," Will assessed. That much was obvious; an irregular bulge jutted under the reddish skin of her wing, something almost black in color splattered around it. Nico recognized it to be dried blood. Very carefully, Will pressed his hand around on the surrounding muscles, apparently feeling for something. "And a couple of torn ligaments."

Nico wasn't sure how he knew that from simply touching her, but he passed no judgment. He'd seen Will work in the infirmary after the war; his healing skills were a force to be reckoned with.
"Come here, Nico."

Nico stared at him. Was Will serious? Did he really expect Nico to be able to help him? He knew Will was used to working alongside his siblings, but Nico was a pretty poor replacement for them. Nico cleared his throat. "Um, I don't think-,

"I just need you to help hold her wing steady." Will's eyes met Nico's, perfectly steady for once that day. "Please."


It wasn't as easy as he thought it would be; Delphyne was huge. Even broken, her wing was strong. To Nico's surprise Will began to hum softly as he worked. Nico already knew that his singing was pretty terrible but this was… actually surprisingly pleasant. He supposed there was a difference between trying to sing opera and a hymn to his father. This was a melody Nico could get lost in.

He couldn't lie; part of him was worried about Will using his powers to heal the dragon. He hadn't failed to notice how much it had taken out of Will with the simple use of his powers yesterday, and Delphyne required considerably more healing. He decided not to say anything though; he was pretty sure Will was already giving him the cold shoulder. And there was no denying Will was a lot stronger than he gave him credit for.

As he hummed his palm burned bright, knitting the dragon's flesh together, re-seaming the severed bones and ligaments. For the most part Delphyne watched Will, but eventually her eyes flickered over to the son of Hades. Nico shivered at the intensity of her gaze, the basin of power reflecting in her golden eyes. She all but radiated the power of the oracle-

And he knelt in the center of the fields of Elysium, the hillsides of wheat burning and flaming.

"You have signed a dangerous contract, son of Hades." The voice reverberated through his head.

The air blistered his skin, his sweat stung in his eyes. Around him a battle raged, screams piercing his skull. This wasn't just his home, this was the final resting place for all heroes, and it was about to be destroyed. It was agony to witness. But none of it compared to the pain he felt upon seeing the motionless figure before him-

Nico shuddered, breaking eye contact with the dragon. Will had nearly finished his work. He withdrew his hand, shaking slightly. "That's the best I can do right now," Will said breathlessly, clearly fatigued. "We'll save you too. I promise."

Thank you. Though she could not speak, the dragon inclined her head appreciatively to the son of Apollo.

Nico let out a pent up breath. "Can you stand?"

Will nodded and pushed himself up… only for his legs crumble beneath him. Nico jumped forward and managed to grab him before he collapsed.

"Will! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Will murmured. Counteracting his words though, he dropped his head into his hands like the light pained his eyes.

"You're not," Nico informed him. "We need to get back to Lou and Cecil. You need rest."
"I don't want to leave her down here alone," Will whispered. "Can't we just stay here a minute?"

Nico hesitated staring at Will's pleading face. How could he ever say no to him? Nico sighed resignedly. "Just for a minute," he told Will forcefully. Helping his friend up, Nico led him over to what was left of one of one of the crumbling stone walls, making him sit down on it.

Nico took a seat next to him. They sat there in silence for a moment, watching the small dragon.

"You probably shouldn't have done that," Nico muttered eventually.

"Perhaps not." Will frowned. "But I'm glad I did."

Nico swallowed hard. "I still don't like-,

"The plan? Yeah, you've mentioned that a few times. It will work, Nico. It has to."

"You're seriously going to fight in front of hundreds tomorrow?" Nico asked him quietly. "Will you're an amazing healer, I'll give you that, but you can't fight. I know," he added quickly when Will opened his mouth to interrupt, "you don't actually have to win; you just have to stay alive long enough for us to distract Python and all those monsters, but even that's going to be difficult. And you just weakened yourself even more."

"I'm not weak."

"I know," Nico said. "I just don't want you getting hurt." Will didn't respond. "Look, I know you're scared for your dad-,

Will made an incredulous sound. "Scared? Not as much as you."

Nico paused at that, mouth open slightly. He had no idea what Will was talking about. "What do you mean? I fight monsters all the time. I have a horde of undead I can unleash on anyone who stands in my way. It's you I-,

"That's not what I mean," Will interrupted darkly. "You don't need to sell me on how you can crush your enemies with all your Underworld-y powers. I've already seen you do that before."

Nico snapped his mouth shut and glared at him. "Good. Then I hope you know I'm not scared of-

But apparently Will wasn't finished. "Your scared of people. And feelings. And youself."

Nico went still. What had brought this on? He couldn't think of a whole lot to say other than; "I am not."

Will eyed him critically. "You sure about that? Because I'd get it if you were. You've been through things no sane person could even imagine. I can't imagine."

"That's 'cause you have no imagination." Nico pressed his lips together, forcing himself to relax his hands which had clenched into fists. Why did Will always have to push about stuff like this?

"Do I scare you?"

Nico glared at him suspiciously, but Will's eyes were innocent and unassuming. The question had been asked out of genuine curiosity. Nico swallowed thickly and tried to bluff his way through; "Of course you do, Blondie. I haven't forgotten you tried to stab me with needles when you brought me to the infirmary."
Will rolled his eyes. "That's not true. I was trying to keep you from turning into a werewolf."

Nico shot him a look. "Only a bite turns you into werewolf."

"That's true." Will almost smiled. "But you didn't answer my question."

"I am not," Nico insisted quickly, "-scared of people, as you put it. More like… knowing people."

Will looked confused by that answer, but his brow had a determined furrow to it. Nico recognized the look and sighed resignedly, knowing Blondie wasn't going to drop it anytime soon. "How do I put it? I avoid people because it can be… dangerous knowing someone."

"Huh. And I always thought the term was 'know thy enemy,'," Will commented lightly. "If you're so concerned about people being dangerous, shouldn't you want to get to know them? To see if they're potential threats?"

Nico smirked. "That's very mercenary of you, Solace, but no. That's actually not what I meant at all."

Will eyed him for a moment, before quiet understanding dawned on his face. "Are you talking about Bianca?" he asked cautiously, like he was expecting Nico to snap at him for merely uttering her name. Ordinarily he might have, but for some reason Nico didn't mind Will of all people talking about his sister. Truth be told it was actually rather calming. "I get it. People can hurt you, betray you. Even if you get to know them and they turn out to be good, they can still die and leave a gaping hole in your heart."

Will eyes drifted down to Nico's hands which had clenched again in his lap. For a second Nico thought he might try to reach out and touch him like he often did, but then he simply took a deep breath and fixed his gaze back on the dragon in front of them. Nico felt a flutter of disappointment in the pit of his stomach. Which was pretty stupid, he reminded himself, since he was the one to push Will away.

Once again Will had proven to be surprisingly perceptive. "I didn't just mean Bianca," Nico said carefully, keeping his eyes down. "But yeah."

Will nodded slowly to himself. "Who else?"

Nico shrugged. Percy's name was first to spring to mind. "Does it matter?" And next, when he had found himself truly alone for the first time, he had placed his trust in Minos. "I can't really remember." And then his father, who had once proclaimed he'd wished Bianca had been the one to survive. "I just want to put it all behind me." Of course that wasn't exactly an easy task, being who he was.

"Why can't you?"

Nico smiled though there was nothing remotely uplifting circulating through his head at the moment. "My fatal flaw," he said shortly. "Holding grudges."

"Oh." Will blinked. Then he smirked slightly and eyed Nico up and down. "Holding grudges? Nah. I don't really see it."


Will looked distracted. "What?"
"I shared," Nico said pointedly. "Now it's your turn."

Will shrugged. "Honestly I don't know what mine is. It's never come up before."

"It's probably something inherently good," Nico said without thinking. "Like Percy's." He felt his face grow hot at the look Will gave him.

He gave Nico a slight smile. "Given it a lot of thought, have you?"

Nico looked from him away very quickly then. He didn't reply to Will's question. As much as it pained him to admit it, once upon a time he had given it a lot of thought. He couldn't help it.

His crush on Percy had been safe, something he could keep concealed within himself. Deep in his heart Nico felt he had always known there wasn't the slightest possibility that something more might come from it; Percy loved Annabeth, he always would. He had been willing to sacrifice himself to the insanity that was Tartarus all to save her from being alone down there.

The memory twisted like a snake in the pit of his stomach. It had been that exact moment, reaching out to the son of Poseidon after he'd thrown himself into the pit after Annabeth, that Nico finally been forced to accept the truth; he'd never had a chance with Percy and he never would.

It stung. Even though he'd finally begun to come to terms with it and move on, it still stung. How much longer would it take for him to truly get over it? Nico's eyes were starting to tingle. He blinked hard.

"I'm sorry."

With a jolt Nico realized that Will was still there and was watching him, though he'd said nothing up until that point. Nico forced himself to meet his gaze. He didn't like the look Will was giving him, like he'd understood more of Nico's silence than the son of Hades would have liked. "I shouldn't have asked. I didn't realize."

Nico didn't answer. He didn't know how to defend himself to Will. He cleared his throat. "I know it hurts, Nico," Will continued softly, "but that's not a reason to cut people out."

"And you know about that do you?" Nico asked peevishly.

"Just a little. You're not the only one to be disappointed by people you loved."

Nico stared at Will in surprise, at the look of raw hurt that registered so plainly on his face. At first he didn't understand what he meant, but then he remembered something Will had said while they were trapped together in the Labyrinth. At the time Nico had told Will he didn't want to pry into his life, but Will had answered 'I prefer the term getting to know someone'. He couldn't deny there was certainly a lot he wanted to know about the son of Apollo.

"How old were you when you were adopted?" Nico asked curiously.

Will looked surprised by the question. "Which time? The first time I was five. I don't remember that family very much. They were alright, kind of plain. The woman or, I guess, the lady who used to be my mom, was having trouble getting pregnant. That's why they got me. But then a little bit later she did end up having a baby and they decided they needed to be able to focus on him more. So I got sent back." Will sighed and ran a hand through his hair, making it even messier than it already was. "The next time was when I was six. They were pretty cool. They had a couple of sons around my age as well. I was good friends with one of them. The other one could be a little mean sometimes but I didn't care; I was just glad I had a family. But that was also the year I went into
Nico didn't actually since his own mother had always been too terrified to let him go to any sort of public school, except for ones specially appointed by his father. But he'd heard the horror stories from other demigods; monsters attacking, constant expulsions, disasters even worse than midterms.

"Weird things happened around me," Will continued. His gaze was distant, lost in times of the past. "They put up with it for a while, thinking it was just me acting out in a new home, and that it would eventually go away. Of course it didn't. Things kept getting worse and I didn't know what to do. I thought something was wrong with me. I guess it didn't help that one of their sons was turning into a bit of a troublemaker. He always pulled stupid stunts; cheating on tests, ditching his class, bullying other kids. I think he resented me a little, although I never really understood why at the time. One day he made the mistake of picking on someone bigger than himself. He got beaten up. Not too badly, but enough for his parents to be concerned. I was concerned too." Will paused and chewed his lip, lost in thought. "He was my family. At least, that's how I felt. I cared about all of them."

"That's understandable," Nico said quietly.

Will mouth twisted. "Not to him. He told everyone I did it. As if. That was it though; his parents finally decided they'd had enough. I got sent back into foster care with them claiming I'd not only been a terrible influence on their children, but was also a danger."

"That's insane," Nico interrupted, disturbed by the thought. The idea of Will Solace beating someone up was almost laughable. "You didn't deserve that. I'm sorry."

"I've moved past it," Will answered honestly. "Actually I wasn't even that mad at the time. The worst part, even worse than being sent back, was just thinking that people actually believed I had hurt someone. It ate me up inside for a long time. I can't describe how it felt. It's a horrible feeling."

Will didn't have to describe it. Nico knew exactly the feeling he was describing. Shame. Completely irrational shame, but shame nonetheless. Nico had felt that way before.

Will took an elongated breath. "After that I bounced around at various foster homes for a few years, but was never actually adopted again. Some were better than others. Most were fine. One was horrible. When I was ten my aunt, Angela, showed up and took me in. I've lived with her ever since. Her and her actual daughter, Melanie. They're the best family I could ever ask for, besides my siblings at Camp."

Nico nodded slowly, taking a minute to find his voice. "How did your aunt find out about you?"

Will shrugged. "I don't really know the details. She doesn't like talking about her sister and claims she never even talks to her. All she told me is that one day she happened across a man who'd been friends with her sister, and he mentioned in passing she'd had a kid she got rid of."

Nico's brow furrowed. "Who was this man?"

"Dunno. Just a friend, I guess."

"Do you remember anything about your birth mom?" Nico worried he was pressing too far, but Will seemed perfectly calm like he'd come to terms with all of it a long time ago.

"I know her name is Naomi," Will said shortly. In the setting sun the flecks of gold in his blue eyes appeared more noticeable. "I know she lived in Colorado. And I know she liked to ski."
So it turned out Will knew about as much about his own past as Nico knew did about his.

"It was her loss," Nico stated quietly. He chewed his lower lip, watching as Delphyne gave a soft snort. The dragon appeared to have fallen asleep in Will's presence. "Getting rid of you, I mean. She has no idea what she's missing out on."

Will looked at him unsurely, a slight frown settling across his features. His gaze slowly traveled over Nico's face and for once the attention didn't bother Nico too much. Will's expression cleared. "Thanks, Nico."

Nico didn't sleep a wink that night.

He lay in his bed and thought of the night the four of them had spent in the Underworld, in that bizarre, old-west town-of-the-dead Rhadamanthus had sent them to. He remembered how frightened Will been the following day, claiming to have dreamt of a gladiator, fallen in the arena. At the time they had all believed it was Apollo. Nico had never once considered that the reality might be even worse. What if their plan went sideways, as they usually did? Python was so sure of himself, so sure that Will would die tomorrow, that that final act would finally be enough to break Apollo once and for all. Will was a healer, incapable of hurting anyone. He was the kindest person Nico had ever met. If he died… Nico screwed up his face at the idea. Will didn't deserve this. Apollo didn't deserve this.

The one thing Nico was sure of was that the thought of Will dying was utterly unbearable. It couldn't happen. He couldn't risk it.

He refused to accept it.

And just like that he realized what he needed to do.

The following morning, for the most part, was tense as a coiled spring.

Nico chanced a glance at Will as he fastened his sword to his belt. Outwardly the son of Apollo looked calm, void of expression. Nico didn't understand it. He himself felt like he was going to puke. Out of all of them shouldn't Will have been the most freaked? He was the one who had to walk into the arena, under the eyes of hundreds of rapid monsters, and try to by them time against an opponent he hadn't even met yet.

Will hadn't said much all morning, and refused breakfast when Lou Ellen offered it. It almost like… he had accepted his fate. The thought left Nico furious but he forced it back. There would be time to tell Will off later. Hopefully.

Right now he needed to worry about their plan. Especially since he was about to throw something of a wrench in it.

Before long Agamemnon came to fetch them. He grunted in surprised greeting when he saw them. "Remarkable. Here I was sure I'd find your room empty and the four of you fleeing for your lives."

That actually sounded pretty good right about then but Nico knew they couldn't. It was with a final look of goodbye that the four of them followed Agamemnon out into the city.

The streets were nearly barren, quiet.

"Most are already gathering," Agamemnon explained, noting Nico's surprise. "They are very eager for the proceedings."
Nico gritted his teeth as they walked. Chancing a glance at Will, he saw the son of Apollo looked pale. His fingers tapped nervously against his thigh. Will usually had steady hands; a necessary skill for stitching up wounds or handling scalpels and needles. He was nervous.

Nico heard their destination before he saw it; shouting, clapping, booing, screams thirsty for blood. The roar of the arena.

The arena itself was not what Nico had expected. Where he had pictured it being circular like the Coliseum or something, this one was rectangular in shape, and built from stone into the sides of the mountain. They had approached it from behind as well; simply by peering down the mountainside Nico could get a decent glimpse of it, not to mention the hordes of monsters roaming the seating. He searched hopefully for Python or Apollo but was too far away. Dozens of emerald green tents had been pitched in the thick grass above the arena.

Will gasped softly next to him. "The stadion. It's supposed to be reserved for races and other athletic competitions. Not battles."

"Yes," Agamemnon told them. "But it had the most seating. Most of the activities have been underway for the past three days; you missed all the sacrificial offerings to Lord Python, as well as the feast that followed." Nico couldn't help but be grateful for that; he didn't want to know what had been on the menu for a feast of monsters. "And then there were the chariot races and javelin throwing yesterday. Oh and the new version of discus Python invented; it was sort of like modern-day dodgeball except that the first team to kill all of their opponents with their discus' won a bouquet of hyacinth flowers."

The four of them gaped at Agamemnon as he continued.

"Today you get the place of honor, Will. You will fight last. The grand finale. Python hopes your performance will be just as dramatic as it was coming into the mountain."

Before Will could respond a sudden thunder of cheering rang up the mountainside, along with another unpleasant feeling that crawled down to the base of his spine. He knew monsters didn't have souls… so who had just died down there?

Agamemnon led them into one of the tents, which was surrounded by guards. Inside was a table, upon which lay pale gold armor. A distinct yellow ribbon had been woven through the wrist band of the gloves. On top of the armor lay a sword.

Agamemnon nodded at it. "Your armor and weapon. Suit up." He watched Will with a cold gaze. The son of Apollo had turned a pale green shade upon seeing the weapon. "Any last words from the fearsome warrior?"

Will didn't answer but glared back mutely. The clamor and roar from the stadium shattered past the tent flaps like a deafening wave.

Agamemnon snorted. "I thought not." Turning away from Will he moved across the room to grasp the sword upon the table. He unsheathed it, the scrape of metal lost in the chorus of voices from the stadium. Gripping it tight in his palm he nodded at the guards. "Keep him here until it is time. I must rejoin Python to help keep an eye on our honored guest." He reached out to grip Will's arm, pulling the son of Apollo closer. "Don't make this harder than it is. I suggest you accept your death with what little dignity you can manage. Remember your father is watching." Twisting his arm slightly, Agamemnon breathed harshly into Will's ear. "This is your final chance to make him proud." A sharp clang rang out, as he tossed the sword at Will's feet.
Nico gritted his teeth. If they survived this next hour he was going to hunt down not only Python, but this piece of scum as well, and send the both of them to the farthest depths of the Underworld where they belonged.

Will's face was white as a sheet. His mouth twisted slightly at the man's words but he said nothing. His blue eyes flicked down to the sword that had been cast at his feet. His gaze remained down.

"Get your armor on," Agamemnon snarled. "I will keep the guards stationed outside until it is time, then they will escort you to the arena. The rest of you are with me; he stays here alone. Let's go."

Nico crossed his arms, glaring at the man. "Do you have no compassion? You seriously won't let him say goodbye to his friends? Besides, that's full armor. You can't seriously expect him to be able to get it on by himself."

Agamemnon's gaze was icy. "The guards can help him if he needs it."

Cecil raised his chin. "Nico's right. He's our friend. We won't leave him alone."

Agamemnon looked annoyed. "Fine. You may stay. But only one of you. Make your goodbyes quickly."

The four of them shared glances. Will met Nico's eyes briefly before looking down again.

Lou Ellen and Cecil seemed to understand. Lou Ellen hesitated, then stepped forward and flung her arms around her friend. "Good luck," she whispered softly. Her eyes were wet. Softly enough that Agamemnon could not here she added, "You just have to hold up long enough for us to get to... him." Wiping at her eyes, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, and released him.

"Thanks Lou," Will said softly. His composure appeared to be swiftly crumbling. His lower lip had developed a faint tremor. Will bit it sharply, the pressure turning the skin white. Nico feared he might draw blood. He stared at Will, silently pleading for the blonde boy to meet his gaze, but he was disappointed.

Cecil stepped forward and also embraced his friend. "I wish I could go in there for you, Will. Don't listen to what that jerk said; you haven't disappointed anyone. Especially not Apollo. And you're not about to either."

Will nodded silently as Cecil drew away, sniffing slightly.

Agamemnon was waiting for them at the entrance of the tent, face inscrutable. Lou Ellen joined him, still dabbing at her eyes. Cecil clapped a hand to Nico's shoulder. "Take care of him, okay? Find us as soon as you can," he said quietly. "The plan won't work without you."

What he said was probably true; Nico was the best fighter. They needed him for their plan to succeed... but probably not in the way they expected.

Nico nodded solemnly.

With final anxious looks, Cecil and Lou Ellen followed Agamemnon out of the tent. The guards followed, leaving Nico and Will alone in the tent, though Nico knew they were all just stationed outside.

Nico knelt and picked up the sword that lay at Will's feet. It was longer than his own, heavier. He frowned at it.
"What is it?" Will questioned softly, noticing Nico's puzzled gaze.

This sword is silver, Nico thought in surprise. It's regular metal. Not celestial bronze or imperial gold.

Will hadn't seemed to notice that yet though. Looking up, Nico found himself staring into Will's soft blue eyes, full to the brim with worry and doubt. Nico swallowed and shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Will. I'm sure it's nothing."

Will nodded slowly. "Thanks you. For staying here with me."

"Of course."

A brief silence fell between them. Will cleared his throat. "I suppose I should probably get ready. Nico, I- I know we have a plan, but if it goes wrong…" Will's voice broke before he could finish the sentence.

"Shh." Nico stepped closer, lowering his voice. "There are still guards outside remember? You don't need to worry about us."

"But-,"


Will frowned. "Why would I be worried about you? I mean, I always worry about you, but still. You've been acting really strange."

"No, I'm not," Nico said hesitantly. "You're the strange one. I'm just… trying to reassure you."

"Okay, you saying that is not reassuring." Will laughed softly but it sounded forced.

When Nico had first met Will he wasn't sure how he had felt… actually, no, that was a lie; he had thought he was annoying. An annoying, overbearing, overprotective son of Apollo, whom couldn't see his help wasn't appreciated. Nico couldn't recall the number of times he had thought about summoning a mob of skeletons to terrorize him until he stayed away. But he hadn't actually done it.

Will watched him for a second, brows drawn together in concern. "Nico, are you alright?"

"Just thinking," Nico replied slowly. Of course Will would be the one to ask if he was okay, even though he was the one who was about to go look death in the face.

Will chewed his lip, watching the son of Hades. "You don't need to worry. It's going to be fine." He sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Nico had also figured out why he'd never actually tried to chase Will away; because somewhere, deep down in the part of his heart that he never let see the light of day, he was relieved. After so many years of surviving on his own, alone, he could no longer remember how not to push people away. Whether it was a gift from the Gods (or a curse) Will was the only person he'd ever met who was simply too relentless to be pushed away by a little hostility. At first Nico had thought such relentlessness annoying. Now, well, still felt that way, but he was also realizing it was one of the best things about the son of Apollo.

"What?" Will asked.
"Actually that's not what I was thinking about," Nico answered honestly. "I was thinking about what you said last night. About how you said I'm scared of the people I care about getting hurt. How you said I use it as an excuse not to care. I realized you were right. I do use it as an excuse."

"Oh," Will said, blue eyes widening in surprise. "Like I said, if there was anything I could do-,

"There's not," Nico didn't let him finish. "But there's something I can do."

"Oh." Will repeated, clearly a little baffled. "Okay. That's good, I guess. No offense, but isn't this sort of a bad time for this conversation? What's your point?"

Nico's heart pounded in his ears. His palms felt sweaty. It would have been less terrifying jumping back into Tartarus than what he was about to do.

He cleared his throat. "My point is I'm done standing around and watching people I care about get hurt."

Will looked genuinely confused all the way up until Nico closed the short distance between them and kissed him.

It was a simple kiss, chaster by far than the one they had shared three nights ago in the warm waters of the island, but it meant more to Nico than the other one had. He realized this might be the last chance he got to kiss Will, because even if Nico did survive what he was about to do, there was a high chance Will would hate him forever.

So for a few fleeting seconds, Nico let himself get lost in the feeling of the kiss, soaking up every ounce of it he could. Will may have been too surprised to react significantly, but it didn't stop Nico from circling a hand around the back of his neck, fingertips brushing into Will's hair.

As much as he would have liked it, he couldn't stay in this moment forever. It was incredibly distracting, trying to focus on what he needed to do while Will was pressed up against him. Somehow Nico managed to get a grasp on his own powers though, letting them surge through him, out through the hand he had place on the back of Will's neck.

He felt Will go slack against him. The son of Apollo even managed a tiny step backwards and a look of dizzy confusion directed at Nico before he collapsed. Nico caught him before he hit the floor, dragging him over to one of the infirmary beds.

"I'm sorry, Will," Nico said quietly.

As much as he knew Will would hate him for this, he figured it would also keep him alive. He hadn't put much power behind the spell; Will would be back awake in less than twenty minutes. By then it would be too late to stop Nico, but he might have a chance to help Lou Ellen and Cecil.

Then he gathered up the gold armor and began changing. With a little skill and a lot of luck their plan would be a success, and all this would all be over before Python was any wiser of it.
Chapter Nineteen:

Mission: Inevitable

(In Which Everything Goes To Schist)

Will woke up and promptly slammed his head into a table. A sharp clang sounded and he looked down to see a short black sword laying on the ground beside him.

Oh. Hell. No.

For a brief second he was exceptionally confused. Surely he was misunderstanding what had happened. Surely Nico had not knocked him out. Surely Nico had not knocked him out and then stolen his armor. Surely Nico had not kissed him, knocked him out, and then hid Will's lifeless body under the table like he was stowing a corpse. His armor was gone too. Just like Will's tolerance and his pride.

He's dead, Will thought, outraged. What about their plan?! If he's not already dead, I'm killing him myself. As quickly as he had filled with anger it dissipated, only to be replaced with blind terror. What was Nico thinking?! What if he was already dead?

Will leapt up in horror, slamming his head into the table again. Cursing up a storm he bolted for the tent flap.

Apollo

One Hour Ago

The only thing worse than walking with chains around his ankles, was being forced to walk with chains around his ankles through a crowd of snarling monsters salivating for his blood.

On the bright side he was learning some colorful language that not even he'd heard before.

On the downside he'd spent the last week and a half getting tortured and could barely stay upright. If it wasn't for the two guards helping to support him he suspected he'd be flat on his face, a very undignified position for an ex-god. Oh well, you could never win.

He was surrounded by a grand total of eight of Python's evil henchmen. Apollo had a feeling they were there more so to hold back the crowd than to prevent him from attempted escape. Python himself walked behind him. Today he had dressed himself in fine robes of deep purple and ruddy green. He looked like a pistachio. While Apollo didn't particularly like that snake breathing his moist breath down his neck but there wasn't a whole lot he could do about it. Alas, it was most annoying.

"Where's Chump Number Two?" Apollo rasped curiously. Why couldn't mortals go even two days without water without themselves parching into the Sahara?

Python's cold laugh raised the hairs on the back of Apollo's neck. "Agamemnon is currently preparing our dear young William for his fate, though it pains me to say so. The boy's got a spark."

Apollo scowled. How dare Python speak like his son was in any way special to him! The mere
notion was downright laughable and beyond sickening. Or perhaps that was simply his stomach groveling for food. Really he couldn't tell anymore. Surely this had to be some feverish dream his mortal brain had concocted, right?

"You'll never get away with this," he told Python quietly.

A second later a gooey, rotting peach splatted at his bare feet, thrown from somewhere in the crowd. Had he been a god he would have turned the culprit into an actual peach tree as punishment. But sadly, he was not a god. Even more sadly, his stomach growled loudly at the thought. He found himself wondering if the peach might still be edible… only for a guards foot to step on it a second later, smushing it into the cobblestones.

He heard another low chuckle. "I am getting away with it, my friend."

As much as he loathed to admit it, it seemed Python was correct. Apollo had been his hostage for what? Almost two weeks now? He'd assimilated powerful allies, created an army of thousands of monsters, and wreaked havoc and destruction upon all of Delphi, a place long sacred to Apollo. And now he was publically parading Apollo through the city that had once been his, on his way to watch one of his sons die.

"If it makes you feel any better," Python's voice sounded right behind his ear, his breath making Apollo shudder. "I'll be happy to put his severed head in your cell tonight to give you some company."

If his feet hadn't been chained, Apollo would have spun around and kicked him where the sun don't shine, and taken whatever resulting punishment he got. Instead the most he could do was press his lips together and push down the nausea rising in his stomach.

"I will kill you," he promised Python quietly. "Whether now or a thousand years from now, one day I will re-ascend to power. I will hunt you to the ends of this earth and I will kill you."

"That is indeed an impressive notion, but I'm afraid it will never come to pass. You are no god, Apollo, not anymore and never again. Once I am finished with you, the rest of your family will follow after you. In a way you should be thankful. You may die in the next few days but the rest of them- why, they will be enslaved for all of eternity. You do not wish to see your family become slaves, do you? Your father? Your sister?"

Blood hummed through Apollo's ear at his words. He would have liked to snap, to attack without thinking, and do whatever damage he could. It's what he would have done three weeks ago. But foolish as his father claimed he was, he had learned a little over the past couple of weeks. Just a little.

"Like I said," he muttered between gritted teeth. "One way or another you will die. I'll make sure of it."

Nico

Ten Minutes Ago

Nico had barely gotten the helmet over his head when a guard poked his head through the tent flap. "You ready yet, son of Apollo? Your time's up. Let's go."

Nico kept his head down and his eyes lowered as he followed the guard out. Though it was unlikely any of the guards or monsters would look closely enough at him to notice he was completely absent of blonde hair or blue eyes, he did not want to push it. The armor was a little too
large for him but he had tightened it as best he could. His own Stygian iron blade had been left behind with Will under the table. He just hoped Will would have the sense to grab it when he woke up and inevitably flipped out.

He followed the guard in the lead, the rest flanking out around him, whether to prevent him from running or for his own protection, he wasn’t sure. With a sinking feeling he realized that in order to enter the arena he would have to walk down between the stands of monsters. Monsters whose eyes were starting to fall on him as he moved within view. As he got closer, the unmistakable stench of dirt soiled with spilled blood met his nose.

Down on the arena floor, he saw other servants of Python appeared to be dragging something away, a dark red streak staining the ground behind it. A body. Mangled almost past recognition. The head was nearly twisted around, neck snapped. A bloody stump of an arm dangled by a thread. Even as Nico watched it tore free and one of the men had to run back and grab it.

Nico dug his teeth into his lip, gripping his sword tighter. His palms were growing sweaty now, his heart starting to pound in his chest. The reality that this was actually happening, right now, was sinking in all too fast.

Doing his best to keep his head low, he looked around but couldn't see any sign of Lou Ellen or Cecil. That was good. It meant they were not waiting around for Nico to appear, but were getting ready to execute their part of the plan. He tried to glance up to the top of the stands to where he knew Python and, of course, Apollo, must be seated, but his vision was relatively limited because of his helmet. He longed to rip the heavy thing off of his head- he had always found himself better at fighting by being faster and more agile than his opponent. The helmet and armor would only hinder him.

One of the monsters made a sudden lunge for him, snarling. "Oh look, Apollo's brat has arrived. Everybody look!" To Nico's horror he drew many of the other surrounding monsters' attentions. "He doesn't look like much. I hope his death proves more exciting than the last one." His statement was lost among the screeched shouts of others. Most all of them seemed to be aimed at insulting him. Or rather, Will.

"You spoiled the fun!"

"I hope it's messy- messy deaths are the best!"

"Lord Python should throw your father down there with you. Why does he get to keep all the fun to himself?"

Nico raised his sword, heart pounding, but one of the guards shoved the creature back first. "Stay back," he ordered. "You'll get you fill of bloodshed soon enough." He looked a little disgusted, which was understandable. Even though most of Python's allies appeared to be monsters and other questionable associates, many of his guards seemed to be demigod's who had been reincarnated before Gaia's fall.

When they reached the gate into the arena, the lead guard swung it open and held out his hand for Nico to proceed. "Here you are, child of Apollo. I'd wish you luck, but..." he grimaced. "The best you can hope is that your death is swift and not too painful. Go."

Nico had never felt so exposed as he did, stepping onto the hot sands of the arena. On all sides the stadium rose up around him like a blockade. Even if their plan did succeed there would be no easy escape for them. It was starting to feel exponentially like Nico had just walked into his own execution.
Oh well. Better him than Will.

A chorus of noise echoed from the far side of the stadium. Nico squinted across as best he could; the sand seemed to reflect the sunlight, almost blinding him with the brightness. Another figure could be seen emerging on the opposite side. His stomach jolted. His opponent. Unlike Nico, he wore silver armor with an orange band tied around one of the arms. To Nico's surprise he didn't look much bigger than Nico himself, certainly not anything like Agamemnon. Then again Python had said he would give Will a slightly easier opponent just to make it more interesting for those watching.

The two of them stopped about twenty feet apart. Nico couldn't see much of him except for his eyes past his helmet. They were brown, and hard. They flicked from side to side like he was scoping the place out, or just couldn't keep still. The strange feeling struck Nico suddenly, a nagging sensation that he was missing something but he couldn't place why that was.

He was distracted from his thoughts when the crowd began to roar even louder. Nico glanced up to see Python had stood up from his seat, raising his arms to silence the crowd. Apparently he intended to make a speech.

"My honored guests," Python spoke when the noise finally died down. "What a long and exciting week it has been. First I would like to offer each and every one of you congratulations for making the right decision and choosing to become my peons… erm, I mean, my allies." Python cleared his throat. "Now I know for hundreds of years now, most of you have been nothing more than slaves to the whims of the Gods. You have been hunted, your families have been hunted, your children have been slaughtered by their so-called demigods. And for what purpose? Just because you all like to eat their children! That, my peasants, is no excuse to have you killed."

Sadly Nico couldn't really get behind his line of reasoning but a lot of the monsters were nodding their heads.

"I give you my word that will change once I am king." His words were met with hoots and enthusiastic applause. "Hear, hear," shouted one of the monsters. Python raised his hands, urging them to be quiet. "Yes, it is true. Tomorrow night an old friend of mine will rise for the first time in over a thousand years. Some of you may have already met him and have possibly even guessed of whom I speak."

Nico's spine tingled. Tomorrow night? Apparently Python was growing more confident. He couldn't say he was surprised by any of this, but it was the first time Python had admitted his goals publically.

"To those of you do not know of whom I am referring; I am speaking, of course, of Tartarus." Murmurs swept the stands. A few monsters clapped, most just looked astonished, terrified, or confused. Python nodded solemnly. "Together, he, I, and another will reclaim the skies, the oceans, and the Underworld."

Nico scowled. Not if he had anything to do with it. Or his father. But who was this 'other' person he referred to? Nico couldn't think of anyone insane or important enough for it to be. "Together we will bring the Gods to their knees. You have my word that these lands shall be yours for the picking. You will be able to wreak havoc wherever you wish, eat all the children your heart's desire. With Tartarus as King of Olympus, and I myself ruler over the earth, and all of you without whom this would be meaningless… together we shall conquer the world."

His words rang through the stadium and were met with thunderous applause. He chanced a glance at his opponent who was staring fixed at Python, apparently enraptured. Great.
Python wasn't done; "In fact, the downfall of the Gods has already begun; looked now, down upon
the arena, to where a child of Apollo awaits his fate. I know many of you were disappointed to
discover that Apollo himself, son of Zeus, would not meet his untimely end upon those sands
today, but alas it will have to wait. Rest assured though; before long his blood will be shed. For
now witness the humiliation and demise of his son!"

The roar that followed sent chills throughout Nico. The entire stadium echoed with the roars and
bellows of a thousand monsters eager for his death. Apparently Python was done speaking; he sat
back down upon his throne, clasping his hands upon his lap. Beside him Apollo sat quietly, his
wrists bound as far as Nico could see. He wouldn't be surprised if his feet were bound as well. He
was also surrounded by nearly a dozen guards. Lou Ellen and Cecil would have their work cut out
for them.

Nico turned to face his opponent, heart thumping in his chest. He still could not see anything more
than his eyes, though he could no longer read them either. Nico had no idea who he was facing but
he supposed it was too much to hope he would throw down his weapon, perhaps deciding Python
was insane, and join their cause. That only happened in books.

The crowd went wild as their blades met with a clang.

Lou Ellen

"Gods, I'm worried about him," Lou Ellen whispered to Cecil, gripping his arm tightly. "And
where the hell is Nico?"

Cecil shook his head, though his brown eyes were wide and full of worry. "It's too late to worry
about it." Nudging her gently he looked pointedly over her shoulder. "It's starting."

Seeing where he looked, she gulped. The group of guards they had passed hovering outside the
tent, were now making their way down through the ranks of howling monsters. Will walked in
between them, head bowed. He looked unusually small compared to the guards surrounding him.
Her heart panged for him. He'd been one of her closest friends for almost two years now. Without a
doubt he had the kindest heart of anyone she'd ever met (even including Cecil, though he was a
close second). He'd saved the lives of more people than she could count and was easily the
humblest person she'd ever come across. To see him forced to fight for the entertainment of
monsters was… disturbing.

"What if something's wrong?" Cecil asked her anxiously, craning his head around. "Where is
Nico?"

The same question was eating at her brain. "I dunno. We should get a move on though."

"Wait." Cecil's hand closed around hand. The feeling was comforting. Having him there beside her
was perhaps the only comforting thing that was happening. Cecil looked around nervously. "We
can't do anything until the fight starts."

Though she hated it she knew he was right. Instead they ducked behind a food-stand selling
"mystery-meat" hotdogs, forced to hide and wait while Will walked onto the field and Python
made a horrifying speech about conquering the world.

As soon as he had finished and Will and his opponent had traded the first blows, Lou Ellen turned
Cecil. "Okay, how should we do this?"

One of the monsters closest to them hissed, "I hope there'sss lotsss of blood. Whenever I sssee
lotss of blood I get ssso hungry."

His two-headed gal pal hissed in agreement, a forked tongue flicking out between her lips.

Cecil sighed like he was already regretting everything, and then flung himself upon the first monster, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

"Hey!" he shrieked, clawing at the son of Hermes.

"Ow!" Cecil yelled back. He turned to the female monster. "Why'd you shove me into him?!"

"I didn't," she hissed haughtily through one mouth while the other said, "Heeth cute." Apparently her leftmost head had a lisp.

"You did," Cecil insisted. "And thank you."

"That is sooo rude," Lou Ellen chimed in. "Knocking your boyfriend over."

"Why would you do that?" The first monster screeched. "I love you, bae."

"Don't listen to these fools!" His so called 'bae' shrieked, pointing at them. Several other surrounding monsters started peering at them, listening in. "They tell wicked lies!"

"They're thrying to break uth apart, baby!" Her left head agreed. All sweetness ended abruptly when she drew back her fist and sent it flying at Lou Ellen's face.

Lou Ellen ducked. Above her she heard a yelp as the girl's fist met an unintended target.

"OW!" Screamed another man. "Watch it, lady!"

"Look out!" Cecil yelled. "They're crazy!"

"How dare you!" screamed two-headed girl. "I am one woman!"

"Yeth, we are one woman!"

This time Cecil was actually shoved sideways into another monster by the two-headed girl's boyfriend. "Watch what you're saying about my girlfriend!"

"I'm not your girlfriend anymore," Lou Ellen screamed, shoving the fork-tongued girl into her apparently-now-ex-boyfriend. "I choose him instead!"

"What the hell man?" shouted, punching the other monster in the face. He frowned. "Wait. You're not even my girlfriend. Who are you?"

"Don't touch me!" howled the monster who'd been punched, spitting saliva into Lou Ellen's. "Die, scum!"

"Who ya callin' thcum?" shrieked left-head. Two-heads ran forward and seized a mystery meat hotdog. She threw it at Guy-Who-Had-Been-Punched. "Take that, Bitth!"

Lou Ellen grabbed Cecil's arm and dragged him out of the way as Punched-Face strode forward and upended the food cart with a scream like he was the hulk or something. "I always knew deformed dracaena couldn't be trusted!"

"That's ableism!" some random monster in a wheelchair screamed. "I'm gonna whoop ya for that!"
"What's happening?"

All hell broke loose.

Lou Ellen screamed and dropped to the dirt as an enraged monster leapt over her head, tackling Punched-Face. Cecil quickly dragged her away from the fight.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. Looking back she saw that now Wheel-chair had right-head in a headlock while left-head screamed obscenities at him. Lou Ellen raised an eyebrow. "That was…"

"Yeah." Cecil took a deep breath. "Tell me about it."

"Should we…?"

"Do it again?" Cecil muttered resignedly. "Yep."

This time it was Lou Ellen who threw herself at a monster.

Nico

The blow jarred through his arm. Nico saw his opponents eyes widen in surprise, clearly not expecting the amount of force Nico had put behind the swing.

Stupid, Nico cursed himself, stepping back. I can't fight like I normally do. They need to think I'm Will.

How the hell was he supposed to do that? Well, he supposed if really wanted an accurate performance of Will's swordsmanship skills he could "accidentally" drop his sword, trip over it, and fall flat on his face and die. Actually besides the last part it sounded kind of fun.

And so, feeling a bit like a moron, he raised the sword in an overhand blow and swung downwards, letting his grip on the hilt go lax. It flew out of his grasp and clattered into the dirt behind the orange-clad gladiator.

His opponent paused in disbelief.

Oops, Nico thought, smirking under his helmet.

After a slight hesitation, the orange figure swung his sword, though it seemed… half-hearted? But that was ridiculous. More likely he was just thrown off by his opponents complete failure of a strike. Nico dodged it effortlessly, dropping to his knees and tumbling forward. As he rolled past his opponent he slammed his elbow outwards, sending it into the back of his knee. As his opponent stumbled and fell he grabbed his sword from the dirt and sprang up, breathing quickly.

His next move would have been to kick sand in his opponent eyes (because he liked to fight dirty and didn't give a damn what anyone thought about it) but that would have been too easy. So he waited, pretending to try to get a better grip on his sword, while the orange figure stumbled up, cursing under his breath. Nico frowned. It didn't sound like Greek or Latin… What language was that? Italian? No.

He pushed the thought from his head as his opponent turned to face him. Nico stepped back lowering his guard a little, hoping to tempt him to take a swing. It worked.

Nico didn't know why he had been worried. The fight was going well. Keeping it going for a few
more minutes? No problem. Or at least it should have been no problem. But then something he hadn't bargained for occurred.

As his opponent's blade flew towards him, an explosion of pain blistered through his shoulder. The shock of it made him cry out. For a moment that seemed endless yet could only have been a fraction of a second, he stood not in a hot, sandy arena surrounded by howling monsters, but in the fields of Elysium with ash falling from the sky like snow. My insurance. The voice resonated through his skull. The heat from his shoulder seemed to consume his entire body-

As abruptly as it had happened, the pain faded. He found himself back in the arena, facing off against an enemy. An enemy who had just swung his sword-

It was too late to block it now. Desperately Nico flung himself backwards only not quickly enough. He felt the cool steel graze his stomach, biting into the flesh. All shock from what he had just experienced vanished in an instant as he tripped backwards, falling upon the arena floor. He clutched his side. Looking down, he saw dark red blood seep between his fingers. With every gasp agony flared through his side.

In a daze he saw his opponent step closer to him, raising his blade.

Will 

Will sprinted past rows of emerald green tents, knocking people out of the way. How much time had passed? What if he had missed it? What if Nico was dead, or Apollo, or Lou, or Cecil?

"Move!" he screamed, nearly sending a demogorgon headfirst into a tent. Panic blinded him or maybe it was the tears beading in his eyes. The arena unfolded before him but his path was blocked by throngs of monsters. Normally this would have terrified him but nothing about his current situation was normal. He flung himself into the midst, fighting towards the stone perimeter of the arena.

His heart leapt from his ribcage as he saw the figure in gold fall to the ground. He squinted at warrior. Yes, that armor was just a little too loose on him. His mind may have been playing tricks but he was pretty certain he saw a fleck of black hair sprouting from the base of his helmet. Unnoticeable to those who weren't looking for it but…

Nico.

Some of the monsters around Will were starting to look in another direction, up to Will's left. He followed their gazes.

In the highest seat, well above the screaming and groaning crowd, sat Python. Will gritted his teeth together at the sight of him. He'd kicked himself back in his chair, hands clasped lazily behind his head.

Upon seeing the boy in the arena fall, he'd smirked and looked over to his right, right at…

"Dad," Will breathed.

Apollo had a black eye, slices and bruises and burns all over his body that Will could see, and his wrists were bound in chains. But seeing him there, within Will's direct line of sight, was the by far the best sight he'd seen in a long while.

His face held terrible pain though. For a second Will was confused. Then a chorus of both booing and cheering swept the stadium. His gaze flicked back over to Python, who had stood up from his
chair, arm outstretched. His thumb was pointed to the ground.

"No!" Will screamed but his cry was lost among thousands. He threw himself for the perimeter of the arena. He would climb it if he had to. He had just managed to get a leg over when arms closed firmly around him, dragging him back. "No!" he screamed, thrashing madly to escape. He'd never make it in time now…

"Will?!" In a haze of terror and horror his eyes focused upon the girl who had spoken, a girl with familiar strawberry blonde hair, hazel eyes, and a mirror fastened to her hip. Lou Ellen. The arms clasped around him loosened as Cecil released him.

Lou Ellen stared at him in shock. Her gaze turned to obvious confusion as she looked at the boy upon the dirt in the arena. Will looked also.

Nico lay on his back upon the torn up dirt. The other figure, the one in orange, stood before him, sword raised, ready to be driven downwards into his chest-

Apollo

Apollo had been expecting it but it still sent an ache through his heart. Seeing Will struck by the blade made his- what was that saying mortals sometimes used? Oh, right. It made his stomach drop. Though he knew Will Solace was a wonderful medic, and an exceptionally brave person as it turned out, he was no warrior. His hands clenched, knuckles turning white, as he watched Will stumble and fall, grasping his side.

No, this was too soon. He wasn't prepared. Get up, Apollo begged silently. Get up, son.

Relief swept through him when Will rolled out of the way. Apparently his opponent had expected the move though because he didn't even try to drive his sword downwards.

Beside him, Python shifted in his chair, leaning forward. My chair, he corrected himself. "You know you can end this, Apollo."

When he didn't answer, Python sat back. He sighed deeply and rapped his fingers against the armrest. "Fine. Albeit I'm surprised by how little sympathy you have for your son. He must feel abandoned."

"What do you know about sympathy?" Apollo spat. It wasn't enough to relieve the acrid taste in his mouth. He watched as Will stumbled back from his opponent, clutching his side. He was hurt. Apollo took a deep breath as he pondered Python's words. "You're saying… If I tell you what want to know… you will let him live?"

"Don't make me laugh," Python said breezily. "If you tell me what I want to know… I promise I will make his death quick and painless."

Apollo couldn't help but think that that was a pretty terrible bargain. Not that it mattered. "I already told you where it is," he muttered petulantly. "You just refuse to believe it."

"Because there was nothing there," Python hissed. "You lied, as usual."

"Perhaps you should have searched harder."

Python's green eyes glittered like bubbling poison. "We searched everywhere."

"Did you try the Olympus Lost and Found?"
"Yes."

"The throne room?"

"Of course."

"Maybe Zeus is keeping it on himself?"

Python clenched his teeth. "My men assure me they gave him a full pat down while he was unconscious."

Apollo blinked. "Oh. Did they also check up his butt?"

Python's hand shot forward and gripped his hair, yanking his head back. "Do you think this is a joke, Apollo? Do you think I am joking when I tell you your son will die? I can make his death more painful then you can possibly imagine."

"Does it look like I'm laughing?" Apollo muttered, as Python released him harshly.

Python did raise an excellent point though; where the hell had Zeus put his powers when he'd taken them away? He was pretty sure Python was ripping the hair from his scalp and while he was pretty sure he could rock the bald look, he didn't fancy it.

"If it is not on Olympus, then… I have no idea. I cannot help you. What do you want me to say?"

"Where would Zeus have put it?"

"I don't…" he broke off miserably, trying to get his thoughts together.

A commotion in the stands far down to his right drew his attention. A wave seemed to be moving slowly through the monsters. Some sort of fight had started. Typical. He squinted at them, distracted.

He had no doubt that Python would make good on his threat to kill his son.

At one point Apollo might have been willing to accept that, not that he would have liked it, but since he had been turned mortal he'd found he'd developed a new appreciation for life. And pain, and death, and everything in between. He couldn't stand by and watch one of his children die, not now that he knew how it felt to be abandoned by one's father. And this one, Will Solace, had come all this way to try to save him, even when no one else had. Not Zeus, not even Artemis.

He owed it to Will to fight back.

Even as he had the thought he watched as Will ducked under another swing- and fell to his knees. What was wrong with him? Perhaps his injuries were more severe than he had imagined? It wasn't unusual for abdominal injuries to be more dangerous than they appeared…

Apollo looked down at his bound wrists and then over at his captor.

Python narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Apollo, I swear that if-,":""

Perhaps he could get his arms around his neck and… what? Choke him? Yeah, because none of the guards would notice that.

What he needed was a distraction.
Not a second after he'd had the thought, he heard a loud thud and felt the seats quiver. Someone in the crowd screamed.

He, and Python, and all the surrounding guards looked up at the same time to see a giant, bronze head snarling down at them. Hot breath that smelled oddly like burnt electrical wiring and gasoline gusted over him.

It seemed his prayers had been answered.

Nico

Nico gasped as the vision faded, sucking sand into his lungs. He choked and began coughing as his sight cleared, just enough to catch a glimpse of his opponent raising a sword above his head. Without pause, he rolled left, gritting his teeth against the splitting pain in his side. He lashed out desperately with his foot and was rewarded with a yelp.

Shaking, he pushed himself to his feet.

What the hell was that? Nico wondered. His shoulder throbbed. My insurance. What was that supposed to mean?

Everything felt hazy. His opponent hadn't seemed to move any closer to him and Nico wasn't in the mood to wait. Feeling a little like a cornered mouse, he lashed out. The blow missed as the orange guy dove sideways.

Like a knife splitting through his skull, his vision shifted again. This time it was definitely not Elysium he saw.

He collapsed at the edge of the Phlegathon, too weary to take even one more step. The river flickered like a mirage before his eyes. "When the time comes and you feel you must act…" Nico groaned into the hot soil. It was that voice again, that voice he could never erase from his head no matter how hard he tried. "…I must ask you not to."

"What do you want?" Nico whispered weakly. Tartarus's words made no sense to his fevered brain. "Please just leave me alone."

"You made a vow, remember?"

Nico scowled as best he could though he felt like his body was in flames. "You forced me to."

A soft grating sound that might have been a laugh resonated in his skull. "That is not of what I speak."

Nico clenched his teeth, fingers digging into the rocky earth, as pain wracked through him. He recalled a legend that if a hero drank from the river of fire he could be healed.

But I'm no hero, Nico thought blearily. Well, perhaps if he was lucky it would kill him faster…

A hand settled upon his arm suddenly. Nico gasped, inhaling ash. He started choking. Beside him knelt Will Solace. Great, Nico thought. He's managed to find me and bother me even in Tartarus… wait. Why was Will in Tartarus with him?

He tried to speak but couldn't; his throat was too dry.

"Remember, Death Boy, you promised you'd watch out for yourself before me," Will told him.
"Don't forget that. You vowed it on the Styx."

Nico desperately wanted to respond, to tell Will how stupid he was and that he should take care of himself…

But he couldn't. Because he was too scared. Because none of this was real.

Because he was not laying upon the ashy ground of Tartarus but in an arena, surrounded by monsters.

Because Will wasn't even with him.

Get up, Nico thought desperately. Get up and fight. Lou Ellen and Cecil are counting on you to buy them time.

He didn't know how much more time he could buy but he managed to struggle to his feet.

Blinking sand and sweat out of his eyes he readjusted his grip on his sword. Spots danced in front of his eyes. Across from him his opponent suddenly looked up at the sky, at something behind Nico. Nico had to resist the urge to look around as well. He could feel himself shaking. He could practically feel his body going into shock. The whole world seemed to be spinning. His opponent was still staring at the sky.

Nico frowned in annoyance. What in Hades name was he staring at? Didn't he know he was in a battle? Couldn't they just get this over with so Nico could pass out and forget everything? Scowling, Nico looked around to see what he was staring at.

And dropped his sword.

There, perched upon the rooftop like a sentinel, right above the pier in which Python sat, was a huge bronze dragon.

Its metallic hide gleamed under the sun. As Nico watched dizzily, it raised its head and let out a roar, before lunging downwards and swiping a huge taloned claw across the top row of seats. Nico watched in vague interest as Python, his guards, and Apollo all leapt from their seats and dove for cover. Though Python and most of his guards evaded being struck, Apollo, with his hands and feet bound was a little too slow. Nico winced as he saw him get thrown sideways and strike the wood beam holding the roof up. The entire structure collapsed, raining down wood and nails and thousands of pounds of bronze dragon.

Well there goes our plan, Nico thought. A bead of sweat dripped into his eye. The dragon let out another metallic roar, and shot out a puff of flames out through its nostrils. Nico could practically feel the sweltering heat from where he stood in the arena… the world swam before his eyes, the sun was blinding. He wondered vaguely if the heat would melt through his armor. Looking down he was aware of something red seeping through his armor, staining his hands.

He was pretty certain the world was on fire at this point. Or maybe the arena. Or maybe just him. Now beside him, the other warrior appeared to be covered in flames…

Everything turned red.

Will

This is madness, Will thought as he fought his way against the crowd of monsters, like a fish trying to swim up-river.
Maybe he was actually hallucinating? How on earth could Festus- and he was about 99% certain that it was Festus- possibly be here? Yet it was clear the entire stadium had all seen the bronze dragon appear. They had all seen it send Python and his men scrambling for cover. Will had seen his father get struck.

After seeing Nico roll out of the way and continue fighting, Will had reluctantly let Cecil and Lou Ellen pull him into the crowd. As much as he would have liked to charge into the arena and do Gods-know-what, that would have been extremely stupid. Unfortunately he had been separated from his two friends.

Will yelped as he was nearly knocked over by some three-nostriled monster. He narrowed his eyes at the son of Apollo, hissing. "Hey, aren't you-?"

Will plunged into the crowd, shoving monsters out of the way. Luckily everyone was in such a state of bewildered terror that they didn't pay much attention to him after that. Down to his right, he caught sight of Lou Ellen and Cecil fighting their way in the same direction he was, undoubtedly trying to get to Apollo. Cecil's sandy blonde hair looked slightly singed. Beyond them Will had nearly made it to the top row of seats. He could just make out Apollo, collapsed upon the floor.

"Dad," Will shouted. Apollo didn't answer. He appeared to be unconscious. "Dad!" At last when he reach his father, he sank to his knees beside him, turning him over. Normally he never would have done so if there was a risk he had broken something in the fall, but, well… there was absolutely no time for caution anymore. Will's eyes widened at the more obvious collection of injuries his father had. Cuts, scars... His wrists had deep purple bruises around them from being bound too tight.

"Look out, Will!"

Hearing Lou Ellen's shout, Will jumped up and spun around... right in time to find himself face to face with Python. Alarm and adrenaline pumped through his blood stream. They stared at each other. Will watched as Python's brows furrowed slightly. He flicked his gaze down to the arena at the two figures and back up to Will. Will blinked. Then he did the only thing he could think of. Well, two things actually.

First he flipped him off. Then he punched him in the face.

Python stumbled back, clutching his nose and looking offended.

"That's for my dad," Will shouted heroically.

Python's eyes narrowed as he lowered his hand. Blood dripped from his nose. "You insolent, conniving little rodent. I should have known you were too much of a coward to fight for your father yourself." Lunging forward before Will could react, his cold hand closed around his wrist. He had to bite back a cry of pain- if he squeezed any harder he was sure Python would break his wrist. "So who did you get to fight in your place? My bet is on that precious son of Hades. The joke is on you; if his wounds do not kill him first, then I will for your treachery. I shall have him drawn and quartered while you watch. You and your father both will pay dearly for your foolish actions."

Will tried to wrench his hand free but Python was strong, far stronger than any mortal. Suddenly a foot sailed out of nowhere, slamming into Python's chest. Caught unprepared, he was sent flying backwards to crash into his guards who were grappling with the giant bronze dragon.

Aminta stood there. She had a small scratch on her face and her blonde hair was spilling out of its
braid but her green eyes were bright and fierce. Lou Ellen and Cecil were just behind her. Cecil turned and kicked one of the guards between the legs. As he dropped like a sack of potatoes Lou Ellen brought her magic mirror down upon his head with a terrifying war-cry.

Jesus, Will thought. They were certainly a terrifying and somewhat barbaric duo.

"What are you doing?" yelled another voice. Agnete's. Aminta's sister ran towards them, shouting. "Sister, have you lost your mind?"

"I'm helping them," Aminta said smartly, like that should have been obvious. She nodded her head at Apollo. "We've got this, Will. Go to your friend. He needs you."

Will looked down at the arena and his blood ran cold. The warrior in gold lay in the sand, unmoving. Something dark had stained through his armor.

"Nico," he whispered. Desperately torn, he glanced back at Apollo. He couldn't leave him, not after everything he'd been through, after everything they had risked to save him. It was inexcusable. Meanwhile Nico was very possibly bleeding to death down in the arena...

"Will," Lou Ellen repeated imploringly, drawing his attention back briefly. "Go. We'll get your dad, I promise."

And so Will found himself fleeing back down the steps like a man possessed, dodging brawling monsters and screaming guards brandishing clubs. However, when he finally leapt over the stone wall into the arena, he was met with a scene that made absolutely no sense.

Nico still lay unconscious in the center of the arena, but the other warrior had moved to kneel beside him. He had removed his helmet and at last Will was able to see his face.

Will choked and nearly fell on his face. "Leo?!"

The boy's head snapped up to look at Will. Messy curly dark hair, wild brown eyes. Yep, it was definitely Leo Valdez, though currently absent of goggles and a tool belt, the way Will remembered him.

Will gaped at him gallantly. Leo gaped back just as gallantly.

Well this all made absolutely no sense for several reasons. First of all, wasn't Leo, like, dead? No one had heard from him since the battle. Second of all, Will was pretty sure that Leo wasn't even good at fighting, at least not with a sword. Thirdly, why on earth was he even at Parnassus, participating in a gladiator fight, while his dragon bit the heads off monsters? None of it made sense. Not that it really mattered right then, what mattered was that Nico-

"You hurt him," Will yelled accusingly, abruptly focusing his attention back on the son of Hades. He ran forward, shoving Leo out of the way, and fell to his knees beside his friend.

"I didn't," Leo panted, shaking his head as he stepped back. He himself looked confused and astonished by recent developments. "I mean- I wasn't trying to. I don't understand what happened! I thought for sure he was going to block it! I- I-," He drifted off, watching as Will carefully rolled Nico onto his back. "You ruined my plan!"

Will had no idea what he was talking about and he didn't particularly care. He drew the gold helmet off of Nico's head. The son of Hades took shallow, uneven breaths. His dark bangs were saturated with sweat. His eyes were closed.
Leo's mouth fell open. "Nico?!"

Will frowned. "Who'd you think it was?"

"I don't know," Leo shouted, waving his arms around. "You, I guess?"

"I'm right here!" Will pressed his fingers against Nico's neck. His pulse was erratic. "Yeah, I can see that now," Leo muttered as Will began unbuckling a strap of Nico's armor. He needed to get it off of Nico if he was going to stop the bleeding.

Running a hand through his curly hair, Leo squinted up towards the stands. Festus had landed atop the highest seats. The metal dragon cocked its head to the side and let out a puff of fire, which quickly died away. Then he let out a horrible screech and retched like it was choking on something. A helmet shot from its mouth, followed by a couple of massive screws.

Leo winced. "I thought I fixed him… Ah, man. This is such a disaster."

Will had to agree. He had gotten most of the armor off by then, leaving Nico in just his skull t-shirt and black jeans. The fabric of his shirt was torn and soaked with blood. Will's head swam unexpectedly.

"Will!"

He heard Cecil's voice and looked up towards the sound to see him, Lou Ellen, and Aminta running towards him. Agnete was nowhere to be seen. Apollo was carried between Lou Ellen and Cecil, his arms draped over their shoulders, still evidently unconscious. "Will, we need to get-Léo?" Cecil blinked. "What are you doing here?"

"Sup' man?" Leo gave a half-hearted wave like they weren't in the middle of a fight, though he looked thoroughly miserable. "How's it goin'?"

"Um…” Cecil and Lou Ellen looked at each other and then back at Leo. "Aren't you, like, dead?"

"Nah. I'm not that easy to kill."

"Oh."

"We must get out of here immediately," Aminta said darkly. "Unfortunately Python managed to escape. Any moment now he's bound to notice we've taken Apollo."

Will hesitated, heart pounding. He couldn't think. His brain wouldn't work. Nico was hurt; he needed to heal him as soon as possible. They had just attacked Python, gotten Apollo back; they needed to run like hell. Which was more important? Nico's life? Their quest? His head throbbed painfully. Of course, the longer he sat here thinking, the more blood Nico lost and the bloodier the arena floor became. The sight made Will's head spin sickeningly.

"Will!" Lou Ellen commanded sharply.

Will looked up dazed, to see that one of Python's guards had noticed them and was pointing, shouting. They were about to lose their chance to escape at all. That decided him.

Carefully he scooped Nico up in his arms and stood, nodding to his friends. Together they fled the arena, Apollo between Cecil and Lou Ellen, Will carrying Nico, and Aminta and Leo acting like guards.
It wasn't easy; fighting through monsters, dodging guards… it felt endless. A baby hydra threw a powdered doughnut at Lou Ellen as they passed, who shrieked and batted it away with her mirror. Powdered sugar rained down on her.

At last they broke free of the crowd, stumbling out into the grassy fields. "Run!" Aminta shouted. She didn't need to tell Will twice. The five of them sprinted past the emerald tents, towards the city. At one point another, lost monster lumbered out in front of them. Showing no mercy, Aminta grabbed the knife from Lou Ellen's belt and, like some sort of trained assassin, sent it sailing at the creature's head where it embedded itself between its eyes. It dissolved into dust.

When they reached the city Will was glad to see that the streets were still bare, though he knew they wouldn't stay that way for long.

"I'm not sure how much farther I can go," Lou Ellen gasped, stumbling slightly under Apollo's weight.

Nico shuddered slightly in Will's arms. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead. He had come around just barely- his eyes were cracked open but they were glassy and unfocused.

"Nico?" Will gasped.

"Put me down," Nico groaned weakly. He placed his hand against Will's chest like he was trying to push him away but it was rather pathetic attempt. "Will, I can walk."

Will highly doubted that and didn't particularly feel like fighting with Nico right now; that would only slow them down and waste precious time. Instead he said placatingly, while trying not to show how scared he really was, "I'm sure you can, Death Boy, but isn't this more fun?"

Nico mumbled something which sounded vaguely like, "I hate you, Blondie." His face had grown incredibly pale. To Will's horror is head fell back limply and his eyes fluttered shut.

"Nico?"

The son of Hades didn't respond. A cold fist seemed to close around Will's heart. "We need to stop," he ordered.

Aminta's eyebrows drew together. "But-,

"He's losing too much blood, I need to heal him," Will shouted at her. His friends were all staring at him. "I won't let him die."

In the distance he heard shouts; monsters were approaching. If they weren't already looking for Will and his friends, they would be soon.

"Go without me."

Lou Ellen gasped. "What? Are you crazy?"

"Get out of here," Will said hurriedly. "Get Apollo to safety."

"We're not leaving you!" Cecil looked outraged.

Will scowled. They didn't have time for this! "But-,

"You're friends are correct, Will. You should not be separated," said Aminta.
"But-!"

"We will stay with you." Aminta peered anxiously down one of the streets. "Come this way. I see a building that looks abandoned. We can hide in there."

They seven of them -well, technically five since two were being carried- sprinted down the street towards the building Aminta had described. It looked huge. Most of the windows were boarded up. There was a padlock on the front door.

They came to a stop in front of it, gasping. "I can try to pick it-," Cecil began

"Let me." Lou Ellen sidestepped him, grasping the padlock in her hand. She concentrated briefly until Will heard a click.

They filed inside, shutting and relocking the door behind them. The building appeared to have been some sort of large shop. It was run down and dark inside but it would have to do.

"Let's get to the back room," Cecil suggested. "Keep away from the windows, just in case. We need to stay out of sight."

And so barricading themselves inside the abandoned building, that's what they did.
Don't Let the Couch Bugs Bite

Chapter Twenty:

Don't Let the Couch Bugs Bite
(Their Teeth Be Sharp)

(Part 1/3)

Will charged for the backroom still carrying Nico in his arms. The building was dark and unheated and lonely like no one had been in it in decades.

"I need light," he said quickly and Lou Ellen summoned a small orb of light which hovered in the air, illuminating the area. The back room had a small kitchen- there was a counter, a sink, fridge, and a table, but not much else. That was too bad. A fully equipped medical ward would have been preferable but this would have to do. While Leo found a light, Aminta swept a thick layer of dust off of the table. Will gently lowered Nico onto it and then stripped his hoodie off over his head. He tossed it to Lou Ellen after she and Cecil had lowered Apollo gently to the floor. "Cut it into strips," he ordered. "And check if there's any water running through that sink."

Will also would have liked to check on his father but Nico's injuries were in far more immediate need of attention.

"Is he okay?" Leo took a step forward, looking anguished. "I didn't mean to hurt him."
"I didn't even know you could fight," Cecil commented, looking sort of impressed.

"That's just it, I can't!" Leo wrung his hands. "I just sort of swung my sword and hoped for the best. He was doing so well too, until- well, I don't really understand what happened."

Will frowned as he peeled the hem of Nico's black t-shirt up. The fabric clung to his skin, soaked through with blood. Will had to blink hard. He didn't know what was wrong with himself. He'd attended to people with far worse injuries than the one Nico had now. He knew how to take care of this...

But did they all survive? The treacherous thought slithered into his head, filling him with paralyzing doubt. What if Nico died? Will had been the one supposed to fight, it would be on his conscience. How would he live with himself?

He took a deep breath, trying to clear his muddled thoughts, as he quickly analyzed the wound. It looked deep and bled profusely. As for internal damage, he couldn't tell just yet. First he needed to get the bleeding under control.
"What do you mean?" Lou Ellen tossed pieces of Will's now cut-up hoodie back to him. He caught it and pressed it firmly against Nico's side, trying to help ease the blood flow a little. It wasn't sterile but it was all they had. Nico whimpered in pain at the contact and murmured something unintelligible in his fevered state.

"Cecil, can you hold him steady?" The son of Hermes came forward to help, holding down Nico's shoulders.

Leo shook his head. "He, like, seized up or something. It happened a few times actually. It was like he was there, fighting, and then he just… wasn't. I didn't understand what was going on."

Peeling away the cloth, Will bit down on the inside of his cheek upon getting a better look at the gash. It obviously needed stitches… which he did not have.

"He needs ambrosia," Will said quickly. "Aminta, I don't suppose there's a chance you have any with you?"

Aminta shook her head, frowning. "Unfortunately, no. You have none with you? I provided you some before we left my homeland."

"We left it in the hotel room," Lou Ellen explained. She cursed under breath. "That was pretty stupid. But we were trying to travel light. We didn't think any of this would happen. We thought we'd be on our way home by now."

That was an understatement if ever Will heard one. If Nico hadn't taken his place… His hands shook slightly as he grasped Nico's wrist, pushing his limp arm out of the way. "Hold him steady, Cecil," he said quietly.

He knew what Nico had said but he didn't care. They had no medical equipment, no ambrosia. Will came to a decision, not caring how dangerous it was.

Then he began to hum. It took a minute for the powers to work, which was fairly ironic since Apollo, his father and the source of all his powers, was in the room with them. He couldn't help but see it as a symbol of how tragic and pathetic their whole situation was. Even so when he finally felt the powers rise up in him it felt like something was holding them back, tugging them in a different direction. Will had to fight to keep them under control, like any second they might rise up and overcome him.

Not that any of that mattered right now.

The rest of his companions fell silent for the most part as he worked, a fact for which Will was grateful. As he hummed, he worked on healing the worst of the internal damage Nico had suffered. He could feel himself losing his strength quickly… although that description wasn't exactly accurate, not really. It was more like… he felt like unbearable heat was rising through him, setting his veins aflame. The amount of power was exponential, but his own strength… not so much.

It was working but slowly, the torn skin knitting back together under Will's glowing palm.

"Will?" Lou Ellen asked anxiously after a few minutes. "Perhaps you should stop. You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," Will squeezed his eyes shut. "Nico's not healed completely."

At the very least it had stopped bleeding but there was still a considerable gash that could be easily reopened the way it was. Will knew partly why it wasn't working; he had never used solely his
own powers to heal something so severe. Normally he used medical equipment as well. But as he moved to place his hand back over Nico's side the room tilted alarmingly.

"Will!" Cecil reached over and gripped his shoulder firmly. "It's okay. You've done plenty. He's not in any immediate danger now, right?"

Will nodded tiredly. Nico hadn't done more that shudder and occasionally flinch during the process. Now he lay still, eyelids flickering. "He's lost a lot of blood but yes, he should pull through. I don't think he'll be awake anytime soon though. How's my dad?"

"He's been through a lot," Lou Ellen hazarded, looking at Apollo. "But I think he just got knocked out. He should be fine."

Maybe physically, Will thought, standing up carefully to go over to his father. "I should see what I can do for him."

"Sure thing, buddy," said Cecil, gripping his arm briefly. "But no powers, okay? We don't need you injured on top of these two." Will nodded slowly, kneeling down in front of Apollo. He didn't wake up as Will did his best to wipe up some of the dried blood and grime on him. Will's stomach dropped as he got his first actual look at his father; his arms housed numerous cuts, ones that appeared to be inflicted with careful intention. He had what appeared to be a row of burn marks leading down from his neck and under his shirt. Will had a feeling if he removed his shirt he would find even more injuries. Apollo also had an impressive welt upon the side of his head where Festus had accidentally struck him.

A cold feeling settled in the pit of Will's stomach. If he hadn't hated Python before, he did now.

"Forgive me for asking," Aminta said slowly, eyeing Leo, "-but who are you exactly?"

"I'm Leo Valdez!" Leo exclaimed quite predictably. "Son of Hephaestus, savior of camp Half-Bloods, hero of pretty girls, et cetera and so forth."

Aminta frowned at him, probably puzzled by his claims.

"This is Aminta," Lou Ellen introduced the Lotus Eater girl. "She's on our side, which-," she looked sharply at the blonde woman, "-thank you for that. You probably saved our lives. I can't imagine Python is going to be very happy with you now though."

"Yeah." Cecil nodded his head. "You sort of threw your lot in with us."

"I am aware," Aminta said slowly. "I hope I do not live to regret it but… I could not deny what I believe is right and wrong. And what Python is doing is wrong. She sighed. "I just wish I could get my sister to see that."

"What happened to doing it for your people?" Will questioned, genuinely curious.

Aminta's feline-like green eyes grew softer. "While it is true I sought an alliance with Python, after his speech this morning I realized such a thing would do no good. If he truly intends to make the world a dinner plate for monsters… Such a place would be no world for us. Our alliance may hold for a while but my people would never truly believe in it. We are a proud race; I realized my people would find the such an idea repugnant. They would not stand for it. An alliance with Python… it is not protecting my people. It will only draw out their suffering before Python finally decides to wipe us out altogether."

"Still," interrupted Will. "I'd hate for you to put yourself in unnecessary danger just for us."
"That is my point," Aminta said simply. "It is not just for you; it is for the world. I would gladly risk my life to do some good. I have spent far too long cooped up on the shores of our island."

Will was relieved by her words. He did not want her to help them only because she felt duty-bound to protect them. That could only lead to more problems. Resentment was a horrible state of mind.

"The real question is what are you doing here Leo?" Lou Ellen asked the son of Hephaestus. "We all thought you were dead. Don't get me wrong, we're thrilled you aren't, but you just kinda went off the grid."

"Tell me about it," Leo muttered, sitting down heavily against the wall. "Let's just say the cure I took before the battle worked. After that I- I had some stuff I needed to take care of."

"Some stuff?" Will asked incredulously. "Stuff more important than letting your friends know you're alive?"

"Yeah, actually." Leo picked at a loose thread on his shirt. He had stripped off his armor while Will worked on Nico. "I had to find Calypso."

"Calypso?" Lou Ellen frowned and leaned forward. "You don't mean the goddess who was exiled to an island do you?"

"She's not a goddess, not anymore. Just a mortal girl." Leo groaned suddenly and dipped his head into his palms, rubbing his eyes. "Gods, this is all my fault. I have to save her."

"Save her?" Cecil asked darkly. "From what?"

"Python took her," Leo stated miserably. "After I rescued her from Ogygia we flew on Festus towards the closest land. I wanted to show her around a little, let her see the world again."

"The dragon that attacked," Aminta interrupted. "He is yours?"

"Yep," Leo said with a slight smile. "Fixed him up myself and everything. He's saved my life a few times too."

"That explains why my people believe they saw a dragon pass overhead a little while ago." Aminta shook her head. "But that is not important. Please, continue with your story."

"We crash landed here, on the far side of this mountain. I didn't realize it until it was too late but I think the amount of mist or monster activity interfered with his internal compass. We were attacked by centaurs and got separated. I fixed him up as best I could but…" Leo shook his head. "Well, you saw him earlier. Afterwards I managed to sneak into this place and realized where we were. I heard that Calypso had been taken prisoner by Python. Hell of a welcome to the new world, right?" Leo rubbed his eyes again like they itched.

Cecil's eyes lit up. "The girl in the dungeons with Apollo. It must have been Calypso!"

"Wait." Leo held up his hand, leaning forward. "You saw her? When?!

"A couple days ago," Cecil answered. "Nico and I snuck into the dungeons but the cell doors are enchanted- we couldn't open them. She looked okay though. She recognized Nico."

Leo simply stared at him in answer, mouth ajar. After a moment he cleared his throat. "Um, yeah. I told her a lot about the seven and our quest. Plus Nico has a pretty distinctive look. That's probably how she knew who he was."
Lou Ellen looked puzzled. "What does Python want with Calypso? I mean Leo showed up spontaneously. This couldn't have been part of his plan all along. What's he up to?"

"While it is probably true he did not intend this," Aminta said slowly. "It might have made his plans a great deal easier."

"What do you mean?" Will asked. The idea was troubling. He had wiped most of the grime from Apollo and set down the piece of cloth on the ground.

"If Calypso is the daughter of a Titan she may know of various types of ancient magic. He might consider such information beneficial to his plans."

"What plans?" asked Leo. "What does he want from her? She hasn't done anything."

"You heard his announcement before the fight," Cecil told him. "He wants to raise Tartarus. Apparently he thinks he can create a better world for monsters everywhere." He gave him a shortened version of their quest and how they believed ichor had been stolen from the gods. Leo whistled softly by the time he had finished. Aminta too looked taken aback.

"Agnete did not speak of this," she said, clearly troubled. "I wonder if she knew."

Will was wondering the same thing. He knew Agnete had been doing much of Python's dirty work but that did not necessarily mean she knew all the details. "Leo, how did you end up fighting today?" he asked curiously.

Leo shrugged. "It's a long story. After I snuck in here I exhausted every detail I could think of to get Calypso out. I even let myself get caught by Python and tried to convince him to let her go. He told me he wouldn't release her until he had everything he needed. Obviously, I thought that sounded pretty darn shady. I couldn't just wait and let him do whatever he wanted with her. So I came up with a plan. I heard the rumors circulating about Apollo being made mortal and that he was to be executed." He glanced over at Apollo's unconscious form and sighed. "I can see now that it's true. Next I heard that one of his kids had showed up and would be fighting in one of the games. I had a feeling it was you, Will. You seem like the type to go to such lengths for your family."

Well that made one of them, Will thought. Though he may have been trying to protect the people he loved, that wasn't nearly enough to prevent him from making some stupid mistake and failing their quest anyways.

"I decided my best chance of figuring out where Calypso was being kept would be to interrogate one of the guards. I didn't have a lot of time to plan. I was worried you were likely going to be killed today or face something equally horrible, and I didn't want that to happen. I figured my best bet would be to catch whoever your opponent was while he was in his tent since he would be alone and ask him where Calypso was being held. Unfortunately he wasn't part of Python's guard and didn't know."

"Who was he?" asked Will.

Leo shrugged. "Another demigod revived before Gaia's fall. His name sounded familiar but I can't think of it right now. I'm sure it'll come to me. Anyway, I decided my next best bet was simply to take his place. That way I could at least try to help you escape."

Will felt heartened. "Geez. Thank you Leo. Not very many people would be brave enough to do something like that. Or stupid." He cast his gaze over to Nico's motionless form. "You know,
besides this fool."

The corner of Leo's mouth tinged upwards. "Thanks. But my plan didn't work. I spent the past few days working on a long distance control panel for Festus, so it would be easier for me to communicate with him from far away. I didn't get to test it thoroughly though and it appears it... has some glitches. Even so I tried to call him to the arena for help or to at least grab... what-his-name from the guards."

"Hybris?" Cecil offered.

"That's the one." Leo sighed. "Whatever. It was a total disaster."

They fell into a silence that was only broken when Nico inhaled roughly and started coughing. Will was by his side immediately. His stomach dropped. Immediately his mind leapt to the worst possibilities. What if there was blood in Nico's lungs? What if a lung was punctured? He had no way of fixing such a problem with his powers alone. Instinctively he cast his mind back, trying to recall if he had seen anything of a straw-like shape that could be used to drain the fluid if it became necessary.

"Nico? Can you hear me?"

There was little he could do without medicine. Will chewed his lip as he stared at Nico's pale face. When the coughing finally subsided- Thank the gods, Will thought- he turned to the others.

"We need ambrosia," he announced. "I'm going to try to sneak back to the room and get it. I know it's dangerous but it's necessary. He may not make it without it."

Lou Ellen and Cecil exchanged glances. "Alright. But let me and Cecil go. I can use the mist to evade the guards, and we're less wanted than you, Will. Besides you should be here for Nico and Apollo in case they need you."

Will hesitated but eventually nodded. He hated asking it of them but it made sense. "Okay. Be careful."

They left.

Leo pushed himself up, dusting off his jeans. "I'm gonna explore some of the other rooms, maybe try to see if I can figure out why this remote I made isn't working."

Aminta turned to him. "I will go with him. Perhaps I can find something that which we may use as weapons." She followed him out, questioning him about electronic dragons, if they were easy to make, and if they would make good protectors of an island.

Will sat down, staring forlornly at the unconscious figures of Nico and Apollo. "Some doctor I am," he muttered bitterly.

"Tha's what I've been trying to tell you," a voice groaned weakly.

"Nico!" Will almost fell on his face trying to get back to him. "Hey, it's okay. You're gonna be okay. Just stay calm. Don't try to sit up, alright?"

"M calm," Nico said hoarsely. His eyes were unfocused. "You're th' lunatic."

"How am I crazy?" Will retorted in a heated whisper, more than a little outraged by the claim. "Are you kidding me, di Angelo? You kissed me and then knocked me out afterwards." He ignored
Nico's expression of vaguely uncomfortable horror, probably because Will had dared to utter the massively embarrassing topic of kissing aloud. Or maybe because he realized he had been stabbed. "Actually, no. You knocked me out while you were kissing me! What the hell was that about, Nico? I thought you didn't want anything to do with me anymore!" He finished his little rant in a heated whisper.

Nico's brow furrowed. "I never said I didn't want anything to do with you, Solace."

"What the hell was I supposed to think after everything you said the other day?" Will demanded, not even sure how they had gotten on this topic. "You're all over the place. You could have gotten yourself killed earlier."

"But I didn't."

"You almost did," Will snapped. "I just spent the last hour trying to stop you from- from-," Will stopped and took a deep breath. "You made me a vow, Nico. You before me. How could you break that?"

Nico froze for a second, his eyes meeting Will's, dark and unreadable. "I didn't break it," he said quietly.

"Like hell you didn't!"

"I didn't!" Nico shouted angrily, struggling to push himself up. Almost immediately his face drained of any lasting color and he collapsed back on the table, exhausted and clutching his side. Will reached out and caught him before his head slammed into the hard wood.

"Don't sit up," Will pleaded softly. "Don't move. Just take care of yourself for once, please."

Nico gritted his teeth and turned his face away from Will. He was clearly in more pain than he was letting on. "I was taking care of myself, Will."

Will shook his head. "You can't expect me to believe that. How is this taking care of yourself?"

Nico gazed at the ceiling above them. "I guess I figured I'd be a lot worse off if I had to stand back and watch you die. The trade was worth it."

Will didn't know how to react to that. "Nico, I..." He cleared his throat dryly. "Thank you, okay? Just don't do it again. You almost gave me a heart attack."

Nico didn't respond and Will didn't say anything else. He wanted to ask him what had happened to him in the arena but he was barely conscious so Will refrained. After a while he fell back asleep. He wanted to ask him what had happened to him in the arena but he was barely conscious so Will refrained. After a while he fell back asleep.

With a sigh Will pushed himself up and went to go find Aminta and Leo again, closing the door to the back room behind him quietly.

He found Leo fiddling with some sort of small metal device and a screwdriver in one of the rooms off of the front entrance.

"I found a screwdriver," Leo announced in greeting. "Not that it's very useful for programming. Discovering a computer would have been better."

Just then Will's heart jolted in surprise as a loud bang sounded behind him. He and Leo froze staring at each other. Beyond the walls he heard shouting and the rapid stomping of boots. "Search in here. Leave no building ignored!"
They cannot come in here, Will thought in horror. Not With Nico and Apollo unconscious! While he and Leo stared at each other in horror Aminta sprinted into the room. "They have found us," she exclaimed darkly. In her hands she clutched the blade Leo had held in the arena as well as Nico's stygian iron sword. "Take this," Aminta told Will offering him Nico's sword. She proffered the other sword back to Leo. "I will attempt to draw them away."

Will's mouth fell open. "What?"

Aminta's expression showed no sign that she could be swayed. "We cannot allow them to find Nico and Apollo in here, not while they are so defenseless. Your father cannot be recaptured, Will. It would be disastrous. I will attempt to draw the soldiers away but you two should be prepared to fight if it does not work."

Will nodded slowly. "I understand. But you're not doing it alone. I'll help you. It'll be more convincing if they see both of us anyways. Leo will you stay with Nico and my dad until we get back?"

Leo nodded.

Aminta's eyes flickered between the two of them but she seemed to accept his argument. She strode to the nearest boarded-up window and reached up to tear one of the planks off. "We'll come out through here and sprint around the corner. If all goes well they will follow us and won't search the building."

Will and Leo helped her rip the boards down as they heard the first crash against the front door and the two of them clambered out. He hated leaving Nico, Apollo, and Leo behind but this was the safest plan.

"Ready?" Aminta asked. Outside the sky had darkened with clouds and a dampness permeated the air like it might rain.

Will nodded, heart beating rapidly. They had barely made it three feet around the corner before they were spotted, which was what they had wanted but also a little horrifying.

"There!" one of the guards howled, drawing his sword with a flourish. "They are fleeing! After them! Do not let them escape!"

His shout was followed by more scrapes of weapons and pounding feet. Madness erupted. Will and Aminta ducked through a group of astonished dracaena who appeared to have been gossiping about the days earlier events. They scattered as the guards ran between them, weapons drawn.

He and Aminta ran blindly through the city, ducking between alleyways. At one point an arrow whizzed within a hairs-breadth from Will's right ear. It clattered against the stone wall of a coffee shop and fell to the cobblestones. Ducking around another corner... Will ran head first into the outstretched arm of a guard.

He shouted, struggling as thick arms closed around him. Aminta came to his rescue; the man yelped, releasing Will as kneed him in the ribs.

"Run!" Aminta shouted.

The small delay had cost them; behind them their pursuers closed in, ahead monsters had noticed them and were starting to block chances of escape. The other day the monsters had stayed back at Python's orders. Now they surrounded them, snarling, teeth bared, clearly more than happy to tear them apart.
A sharp cry behind him made Will turn.

Aminta had fallen to the ground, pinned down by one of the monsters. She had her grip in his hair, desperately trying to keep his snarling fangs away from her throat. Will's heart did a leap. He reached over his shoulder desperately, only for his hand to clasp around thin air. Oh, right. He did not have his bow. Panicking slightly, he raised his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly.

Much of the crowd fell away from him, clutching their ears and howling. The piecing note rattled the windows of the surrounding buildings.

While everyone was stunned, Will ran forward and kicked the monster off of Aminta. He grasped her arm and drew the blonde girl to her feet. A narrow scratch which decorated with small beads of blood lay across her cheek but otherwise she appeared unharmed.

"Duck!" she shouted at Will, eyes widening. Will dropped to the pavement. A whoosh of air told him a sword had flashed through the air where he had been standing less than a second ago.

Snarling, Aminta leapt over him and introduced the man to her fist.

"Ow!" He toppled back with a shout.

Will glanced up to see that another one of the guards had made it past the monsters to them and was lowering his crossbow-

Will launched himself at him desperately. He crashed into him, but it wasn't quick enough to stop the bolt from flying. It skittered into the chest of one of the monsters, wildly off mark. Grappling with the guard, he landed hard on the pavement, being awarded with rather nasty scrapes across his elbows.

He was aware of Aminta fighting behind him.

At last he managed to extricate himself from the fallen guard and stood, finding himself back to back with Aminta. They were completely surrounded. All Will could see were fangs, claws, talons, and bloodthirsty eyes wherever he looked. He was vaguely aware of the guards shouting, trying to fight through the throngs of monsters to get to the two demigods. While they probably wanted them, or at least Will, alive, it was clear the monsters had plans for dinner. Unfortunately dinner seemed more likely at the moment.

"I call dibs on the boy," a man with glowing yellow eyes growled through his yellow stubbed teeth.

"Aye, en all take the girrl," a lady agreed, who, for gods-know-why, was dressed like the captain of the 1700's British navy.

Filled with dread, Will searched desperately within himself for the endless power he had felt earlier. As always it did its best to evade him but he pushed even deeper, searching for the feeling he had felt back when they had faced Morpheus and his two brothers.

"There's no dibs," shouted someone else. "There's not enough for us all. I say it's free for all-"

The power wouldn't come. That's not good enough, Will thought angrily. After everything she had done for him, he owed it to Aminta to succeed. He focused, searching for that incinerating heat that didn't belong to him.

As Will stared into the ferocious crowd, warmth exploded through his body. It seemed to expand
outward from him, illuminating the square where they stood. The light blinded him, blotting out everything except the inescapable fire. He had no control. He had no idea what was happening. If a bomb had gone off in his chest he was sure this was what it would feel like in the split second before he combusted. He could only hope he hadn't accidentally incinerated Aminta.

Eventually the light finally began to fade and the heat left him… Only it kept fading and fading, darkening and cooling, until the world went black altogether and fell over sideways.

Something struck Will's face hard, leaving his cheek stinging painfully. His throat was parched, his vision blurred. He felt like every bit of moisture had been sucked from his body. His tongue was thick and fuzzy. He blinked hard until his vision came into focus. When it did he wished he would pass out again.

He was in the throne room. A number of guards surrounded him. He was on his knees, hands bound. Aminta was in the same position beside him. Agnete was among the guards, though her expression was strained, her eyes focused on her sister. Before Will stood Python.

"What did you say happened?" he said softly, fingering his chin thoughtfully.

"Half of my men were blinded," Hybris snapped. It was he who had slapped Will awake. "Not to mention the monst- that is, you're people."

Will did not know what they were talking about. His mind refused to work, sluggishly tuning to the current events like the hands of a broken clock. A sour taste coated the roof of his mouth. He wanted to throw up.

"I see." Python's eyes were oddly calm like a marsh turned stagnant. His image flickered before Will's fevered gaze. "And what of you, Aminta? What should I do with you?"

Agnete wet her lips, taking a small step forward. "My lord," she began anxiously. When Python did not interrupt she continued. "My sister is confused. She was not thinking clearly."

"You think so?" Python mused. "It seems to me her thoughts and actions are perfectly clear. She has not only betrayed myself and my cause, but you as well, Agnete. Extreme actions require extreme consequences."

Agnete had grown pale. She tried again desperately. "She didn't betray you!" she cried. "I- I asked her to do this. I asked her to go with them and find out where they were hiding."

Python sighed. "Do not attempt to lie to me for your sister's gain, Agnete. It will not work."

"I'm not lying, I swear!"

"What you claim to be true is impossible. Those demigods never would have let her accompany them if they did not know her. They are not completely stupid. They already trusted her. She has been helping them since they arrived on that boat. Besides, you forget I was also at the game earlier. Did you also tell her to attack me then?"

"N-no," Agnete said. Will had never heard her so ill-composed before. "She was trying to help me. Please, my lord-,

"Silence." Python held up a thin hand. "Had she not attacked me this morning, Apollo would never have escaped and neither would have his insolent brat. Her actions very nearly destroyed my plans. Luckily that did not happen, but it has cost me time and the lives of many of my people. For that she will have to answer."
"Wait!" Agnete cried, striding forward. "Please-"

Python did not wait. "Kill her."

Clouded as his head was, Will's eyes widened in horror at the order.

"No!" Before he could think to do anything, Agnete lunged forward with a wild cry. She managed to strike one of the guards in the face before they grabbed her and dragged her back, writhing and screaming at them.

Straining to look around, Will saw that Aminta looked inexplicably calm. She simply stared at her sister, expression blank and unreadable.

"Have you any last words?" Python asked her.

Aminta raised her chin an inch. "Not for you." Her gaze shifted to her older sister who stared at her with sheer terror on her face. "Do not do anything stupid. Promise me."

"Fight!" Agnete screamed at her, like she wasn't bound, weaponless, and vastly outnumbered. Agnete nearly broke free of the guards holding her but another ran forward and she was wrenched back again. "Aminta, fight!"

A glint of metal caught the corner of Will's eye as Hybris drew his sword behind Aminta.

"Stop!" Will shouted but he was dragged back as well. This would not happen, it could not. Aminta had done everything she could to help them, to protect her people. Will kicked and struggled desperately but was far too weak to provide any sort of challenge. Desperately he reached for the power he had felt earlier, not caring if it killed him. He could not find it. Either it was gone or he was too exhausted from before to utilize it.

Something was going to happen, Nico or Apollo or anyone was going to burst through the doors and put a stop to it all…

Will didn't look as the sword came down but he could not block out Agnete's screams. All thought and feeling fled him. He had gone numb. Some logical part of his brain told him he should be screaming at Python along with Agnete, fighting at whatever cost, reacting in any way at all. But there was no logic in this situation. He couldn't understand why it had happened or why the fates had done this.

"Take her out of here," Python ordered over Agnete's cries. "Do not bother coming back Agnete. You have until midnight to gather your things and leave my city. If I find you here after that your fate will be the same as your sister's."

Agnete continued screaming Aminta's name as if her sister could still hear her even until she was dragged towards the golden doors. "You think you have won?" she screamed eyes mad with rage. They were also wet. "You have not! You do not understand the powers you are playing with! Mark my words, I will see my sister again, I will see all my family again, and when I do we will get our revenge!" She was cast out the door screaming unintelligibly.

Will stared blankly at the golden doors as they swung shut. He was fairly certain this was all a nightmare and he would wake up any time. Anything less than that was unacceptable. He squeezed his eyes shut, lightheaded. He couldn't bring himself to look around the room. If he did he was not sure he'd survive what he saw.

He didn't open his eyes even when he heard Python speak about him. "Put him in the dungeon for
now. If Apollo could not give me the information I need, maybe this one can."

"Come on," a guard growled, pulling him up to lead him away. Will didn't even try to help bear his own weight. To his relief, apparently at that moment his brain decided that it'd had enough of this insanity, because a second later he fainted.

Don't Let the Couch Bugs Bite

(-and Their Minds Mad.)

(Part 2/3)

The gentle sound of rain shattering over the rooftop pulled Nico back to consciousness. He lay where he was for a moment, slowly becoming aware of the horrible pain in his side. He got the strangest feeling that he'd been asleep for hours. His muscles felt stiff and a bad taste coated his mouth. Another sound besides the rain, a rapid rustling, caught his attention.

He cracked an eye open. Wincing, he clasped his hand over his side and peered down. To his surprise a long scar lined up the left side of his stomach, ragged and enflamed on his pale skin. Even the simple act of raising his head gave him a head-rush. He realized the sound he had heard was Will.

Across the room the son of Apollo was sorting through the pockets of his torn-up hoodie. Nico heard him curse softly under his breath. "What are you doing?" Nico croaked weakly.

Will jumped at his voice and looked towards him in surprise. Something seemed off in his gaze but Nico couldn't place what. "Just looking for something."

"Looking for what?"

Will took a moment to respond, glancing down at the ground and chewing his lip. "Um… my bow."

Nico frowned at the ceiling, willing it to stay still for a moment. "Didn't you leave it in the hotel room?"

Will paused in his search. "Oh, yeah. I did."

Nico eyed the old stained ceiling above him. "Where are we?"

"An abandoned building. I'm not sure what it used to be." He fell silent and stared down at his hands, apparently lost in thought. After a moment he stood. "I'm going back to the hotel room."

"You can't go back!" Nico sat up quickly and almost passed out again. He shuddered and clenched the side of the… table? Why was he laying on a table? "It's too dangerous. Python's probably got everyone looking for us. Speaking of, where are Cecil and Lou Ellen? And Apollo? I had a weird dream that Leo was with us too. And Aminta."

Will paused, a strange expression passing over his face. "Cecil and Lou Ellen are around somewhere," he said haltingly. "Apollo's in one of the other rooms. He's… still unconscious."

"You can't go back!" Nico sat up quickly and almost passed out again. He shuddered and clenched the side of the… table? Why was he laying on a table? "It's too dangerous. Python's probably got everyone looking for us. Speaking of, where are Cecil and Lou Ellen? And Apollo? I had a weird dream that Leo was with us too. And Aminta."

Will paused, a strange expression passing over his face. "Cecil and Lou Ellen are around somewhere," he said haltingly. "Apollo's in one of the other rooms. He's… still unconscious."

"We need to find a way out of this city." He said the word 'city' as if it were poisonous.

"Don't worry about that right now. Stay here and heal. I'll… be back before you know it."

Nico scowled, full of doubt. "You can't be serious. It's too dangerous out there. You're not going
out there alone."

Will glared at him. "I am and I will be fine."

Nico scowled around his throbbing head. "If you're going I'm coming with you."

"No way. You're hurt. You'll slow me down."

But Nico was adamant. "Either we go together or you don't go at all," he persisted stubbornly. He slid down from the table unsteadily, gripping the corner to remain upright. The world around him spun and revolved dangerously.

Will stepped forward and gripped his arm, preventing his knees from buckling. "You are persistent, aren't you? Fine. Come along if you must. Just hold on a second, okay? I'm going to go tell… the others." Will broke off suddenly, a strange expression settling over his face that Nico didn't understand. "Whatever. Just sit down for a minute." He tossed Nico's discarded aviator jacket onto the table beside him and left the room.

Will was acting odd but Nico didn't let himself worry too much. After all, their whole situation was a mess. He was also probably in shock from narrowly escaping Python with their lives and seeing his father, injured and beaten up. That didn't even cover their own relationship. Nico would be upset too.

Nico slipped his jacket on, careful to avoid straining his side. He pressed his fingers curiously against his black shirt, where it felt wet, and they came away tinged an orangey color from blood and sweat.

Will returned then, a troubled look on his face. "Ready?"

Nico nodded. Upon taking a step forward though, he swayed and nearly fell. Will stepped forward and caught his arm, yet again, this time wrapping it over his shoulders. "I really wish you would just stay here," he muttered. Catching the look on Nico's face he added, with a sigh, "But I don't feel like fighting with you. Come on."

Will helped Nico limp into the front room. Nico cast his gaze around but he couldn't see Leo or Aminta anywhere, to his disappointment. Other doors led off from the main room. He supposed they were somewhere else in the building. "Aren't you worried we'll be seen?" Nico muttered as they reached the boarded-up front door.

"It's started raining out," Will told him. "Several rounds of guards came by earlier but they paid this building no mind. They're should be past us by now- they seemed to be working outwards towards the entrance of the city. We should be fine if we're cautious."

Will woke up slowly on a cold floor. For a precious few seconds he didn't know where he was but then the memories flooded back. He curled up, sobs rising in his throat, hiding his head in his arms. Aminta, their one and only ally in this accursed mountain, was dead.

Leo was alone, hiding in an abandoned building with two unconscious friends. Nico might be bleeding to death at that very moment. Apollo was weak from weeks of torture and would be little use without his powers. He didn't even know if Lou Ellen and Cecil had managed to retrieve the ambrosia without being caught.

He couldn't get the sound of Agnete screaming for her sister out of his head. He had never really cared for her much before, but now he felt a certain kinsmen-ship with her; they both hated Python,
they both longed for his death. Will had never longed for anyone's death before and the realization that he did now was startling. If he could have he would have wrenched apart the bars of his cell, rushed to the throne room and blasted Python apart with Apollo's power, not caring if it should kill him.

But it wasn't possible.

Instead the best he could do was lie there and cry, wondering if the rest of his friends were even alive at all.

Outside it was dark and drizzling. Fog had settled in the streets. Thick droplets splatted on Nico's jacket, dampening his hair. He held his hand out, letting it wash some of the drying blood off. If Nico took a guess it was probably late afternoon. The chilly air lapped pleasantly at Nico's fevered skin as he and Will stumbled into the closest alleyway, like some lopsided, four-legged creature.

They made slow progress through the city, ducking between alleys, dodging monsters. Most had retreated inside during the storm. At one heart-lurching moment a group of guards trotted by, knocking on front doors, questioning the inhabitants. It wasn't as difficult as Nico had worried it might be but by the time they stood outside the familiar hotel his head spun and his knees shook.

They had to hide behind a counter until the pretty harpy girl wandered away from her desk and away from the lobby.

When they reached their room, Will pressed his ear to the door before inserting the key. Their old hotel room was empty, though it was clear someone had recently searched it. Sheets had been torn from the beds, doors thrown open. The door to the balcony was wide open, the icy wind making the old curtains waft melancholy-like.

Will helped Nico stumble over to the couch, which he immediately slouched down on, utterly exhausted from the short walk. To his bewilderment, Will promptly wandered over to the dresser and began opening and closing all of the drawer, searching.

"Your bow's under your bed," Nico reminded him wearily.

Will paused in his search. "I know. I'm just… making sure we didn't forget anything else."

Nico's head pounded from the earlier loss of blood. "Like what? It's not like we had much to forget."

Will's brows drew together and he looked sharply at Nico. Abruptly he turned and made his way to the side of his bed, grabbing his bow from under it. He sat up… and then yanked open the end table drawer to look inside.

"Are you… mad at me?" Nico asked him raggedly.

Will didn't look at him but continued searching, now moving to the other end tables, as he answered carefully. "Of course not. Why would I be mad?"

"You were mad earlier."

"Come on," Will muttered under his breath. "It's got to be here." Disappointed, he rapped his thumb against the end table. "Um, no. I'm… not mad anymore."

That was a bit of a relief. Nico was not in the mood to deal with another spat with his friend.
"You couldn't have just waited?" Nico muttered, lifting a hand to his head. The ceiling seemed to swirl the longer he stared at it. He shut his eyes. "I'm sure we would have made it back to camp soon enough."

"With you and Apollo injured I don't think we'd have made it very far," Will said shortly. Now he was peeping under the other beds.

"Well yeah but he wouldn't have been injured for long, right?"

Will frowned a little at that. "Um, yeah. I guess I could have healed him."

Now it was Nico's turn to frown. "That's not what I mean. We should have just waited for him to wake up."

"What are you talking about?" Will snapped, clearly annoyed.

Nico scowled. "So he can take his powers back. Then you won't have to worry about them hurting you anymore."

Will froze, mouth slightly open, brow furrowed. "You have got to be kidding me," he muttered through his teeth.

Nico stared at him. "What's wrong? Will, are you okay?"

Will looked at him and for the first time his blue eyes weren't like summer skies, more like… a frozen lake. "Are you telling me this was all for nothing?" he asked, so quietly Nico strained to hear him. "That she…" His expression grew strained. "…died… for nothing?"

Nico stared at him in sudden alarm. "What are you talking about? You're acting really strange."

"You would be too." Will stood and moved closer. He stopped at the footboard of what used to be Cecil's bed and sagged against it. "Unbelievable. Oh, how the fates must be laughing at me!"

Nico stared at him utterly bewildered. Then, slowly, like it was something he'd known unconsciously but had only just come to light, an uncomfortable realization hit him.

"You're not Will.."
Cecil

Lou Ellen's grip on his arm brought Cecil to a stop. "What in Hades," she hissed, eyes narrowing as she scanned the street.

"What is it?" asked Cecil. It had begun to drizzle and there weren't many monsters out and about, but he didn't want to risk blowing the cover of mist Lou Ellen had created by drawing attention to themselves.

Lou Ellen took a moment to respond, still scanning the streets for something. Under the pale light her hazel eyes appeared more moss green than brown. "I thought I just saw…" She shook her head. "But that's ridiculous."

"What?"

She hesitated. "I thought I just saw Nico and Will," she admitted. "Just for a second. I must have imagined it." She reached into the pocket of her coat as if to reassure herself that the ambrosia was still there. Catching Cecil's concerned glance, she gave a small smile that looked more like a grimace. "Sorry. I guess I'm just stressed out."

Cecil gripped her hand. "Trust me, I get it. Let's get back to the others. They're probably wondering where we are. Hopefully Apollo will be able to zap us out of here once he gets his powers back."

Nico

Nico had thought Will was acting strange and now he understood why. The realization came too late though; blindly, stupidly, like a loyal and loving puppy he had had followed him here. He had been so, so stupid simply because he had wanted to help Will Solace. He had wanted to help Will the way Will had helped him.

Every detail was accurate, from the way his bangs curled over his forehead to the shape of his nose and mouth. But whomever this blonde haired, blue-eyed person was that stood before him now, was not him. This Will's blue eyes were dark with a mixture of untapped pain and anger that Nico did not understand. Plenty of suitable questions popped into his head- Who are you? What do you want? -but instead all he could think to ask was; "What happened to Will? Where is he? I swear if he's been hurt or- or-," He trailed off, overcome with horrible thoughts.

"Do not worry for your friend. In any case, there is nothing you can do to help him now."

The way he spoke… there was only one person Nico could think of who had such strong abilities with the mist that she could look like another person…

"Agnete?" Nico said cautiously. Will's eyes narrowed slightly and Nico knew he had guessed correctly. "What- what are you doing? What do you want?"
"There are many things I want," Agnete said slowly. "Most of which I cannot have… for now. I want what I have lost, what has been taken from me."

Nico wanted to groan. Speaking in riddles? Yep, definitely Agnete. He cursed himself for being stupid enough to get injured. "What exactly have you lost?" Nico muttered. "You chose to leave your people. Maybe if you go ask nice they'll take you back. I'm sure Aminta can convince them to let you return. They still respect her."

He really wished Agnete would change back into herself. The twisted expression she wore didn't suit Will's face. "How dare you," she seethed. "You don't- you have no idea-," she stuttered to a halt, unable to continue. She took a deep breath. Nico frowned. What had happened to her? Where was the smug, self-righteous attitude he had grown accustomed to? "I had hoped you might be able to help me, but now… now I realize I do not need anyone's help. I will have to do it on my own."

"Do what?" With sudden anxiety Nico remembered Will's dream... but surely that wasn't likely to happen? After all, what reason could Agnete have to kill him? Sure, she was pretty psychotic and acted impulsively and took an unsettling amount of pleasure from other people's misery, but wasn't she more sensible than that? "Where is Will?" he asked nervously, eyeing his surroundings and trying to ignore the pounding in his head. What had even happened to his sword?

"He is safe," Agnete said dismissively. "That is, safer than any of your friends. Safer than you."

Nico shot her a glare. "Where is he?!"

Agnete's mouth pressed into a hard line. She acted as if she hadn't heard him. "What you say is impossible! I- I have lost so much. When the Gods showed up upon my island, I believed they had taken it with them… and now you tell me that the Son of Apollo had his father's power within him all along?" She shook her head, eyes filled with hate. Whether it was towards him or Will or the Gods, Nico wasn't sure. Apollo's power? That's what this was about? He supposed it made sense that she knew; she had stolen it from Hermes and then they from her. "Just tell me one thing," Agnete whispered. Her voice, Will's voice, trembled. "Did he know?"

Nico stared at her, mouth slightly ajar. Agnete's eyes flashed. "DID HE KNOW?" she screamed.

Nico didn't answer, utterly shocked by her outburst. She was asking him if Will knew he had Apollo's powers? Why did that would matter? They had all known. But did Agnete seriously think they would have told Python? Or her? Was she insane?

Nico's silence seemed to give Agnete her answer. Her face contorted in fury. "If he had said something… he could have saved her. HE COULD HAVE SAVED HER!"

Nico flinched, heartbeat rapid. Will screaming at him was bizarre and disturbing to say the least.

Agnete's chest heaved with emotion. "The Gods, their children… After a thousand years, you are all still the same; selfish… and cruel!" Will's eyes brimmed with tears. Nico's own eyes flickered bird-like around the room, searching for something, anything to use as a weapon. There was absolutely nothing. Agnete shook her head, all but trembling with rage. "Python was right about one thing," she whispered. "The world is long overdue for a change in leadership. I will see all of you burn!"

With those words, she threw Will's bow aside and lunged at Nico. He managed to roll backwards and kick his feet into her- or rather Will's- chest. Agnete stumbled back, snarling. Nico tried to jump up but the room spun like a kaleidoscope and his legs nearly gave out. He couldn't even stand, couldn't fight-
Agnete slammed into him, tackling him against the couch. Luckily his head slammed into the soft cushioning, instead of the wall, but it still didn't do him any favors. He managed to grab her wrist before her she could rake her nails across his face. Her strength was inhuman and he was weak. She quickly ripped her wrist from his grasp, only for it to close again, this time around his throat.

What was wrong with her? She had clearly gone mad, lost any heed to reason-

"If your precious child of Apollo couldn't be bothered to save my sister," she snarled next to his ear, "-then I will take away what he cares most about!"

What Will cared most about? It certainly wasn't him, Nico wanted to scream. But he couldn't even get air down his throat, much less words. Nico's lungs burned as he fought for breath. He thrashed wildly trying to kick Agnete off of him. In answer Agnete swung her leg over him, holding him down with all her weight.

Blindly, Nico struck out, trying to grab Will's throat. He jerked back at the contact. For a second Nico thought he had managed to gain some ground but then he felt the pressure return around his throat. He struggled desperately but Will's grip was impossibly strong. He became vaguely aware of a sharp burning in his side. He wouldn't be surprised if it had begun bleeding again. Spots danced in front of his eyes in the darkness. They seemed to swirl and twinkle like stars until they made a constellation that looked like a twisted grin.

Will was right, Nico thought. About everything.

This wasn't Will.

What if he died here? He might have welcomed death once but now… Now the thought of never seeing Will Solace- the real Will Solace- again was unthinkable. As a dull fog started to overtake his brain and the pain started to lessen, the last image he saw in his mind's eye was of Will's blue eyes hardened mutinously with hatred and grief.

Apollo

How peculiar, Apollo thought, pushing himself up with a pained groan. Before him lay a vaguely familiar and thoroughly unconscious demigod. What was his name? Liesl? Leon? No, Leo. Valdezinator? Apollo thought. What was he doing here in an old, deserted basement with Apollo? And why was he unconscious? Perhaps the dragon had gotten him too. Perhaps this strange room they were in was actually the dragon's stomach and they were about to be digested…

The door burst open and in stumbled two others, a pale girl with a rather pathetic attempt at dreads and a more muscular boy who also looked strangely familiar. Apollo froze, wondering if he should prepare for a fight. Of course winning any fight in his current state felt unlikely. Perhaps he should play dead instead…

"Shut the door," the girl gasped. Her cheeks were bright pink from the apparent cold weather. They both wore jeans, but while the girl wore a light brown leather jacket, the boy wore a blue long-sleeved t-shirt. He shut the door quickly. "Where's- Apollo!" His eyes widened as they caught sight of him before drifting to the unconscious demigod beside Apollo. Though Apollo had thought it impossible, his eyes grew even wider. "Leo!"

The girl followed him, eyes narrowing in suspicion. "What happened to him?" she demanded at Apollo like he held all the answers. "Where's Will? Where's Nico?"

"And Aminta?" added the boy.
Apollo deemed it safe to assume he was not in any immediate threat of being slaughtered. He shrugged, which was also painful. "Don't look at me! I woke up and he was just like this. Who are you people? Where am I? What happened? Where is-" Apollo's voice faltered. He jumped upwards and seized the boy with strength he hadn't known he had, shoving him harshly against the wall. "Will! Is my son dead? Answer me or I'll smite you!" Apollo cocked his head to the side. "Well, I'll smite you as soon as I am able! Or I'll just ask my sister to! She hates people like you; males."

The boy's eyes widened. Apollo realized then why he looked familiar. Actually he looked sort of like the kid who had helped raise Kronos and nearly destroyed Olympus-

"Luke?" he asked. Wow, Gaia really had brought back a lot of mortals…

"Let go of him," the girl yelped. "Will is fine, Lord Apollo. I'm Lou Ellen and this is Cecil. We're friends of Will's." Lou Ellen quickly introduced the two of them, and then nudged Leo with the toe of her sneaker before kneeling by his side. "And this is Leo."

"We've met," Apollo said stiffly. He released Cecil and sheepishly straightened his shirt for him.

Lou Ellen raised an eyebrow, reaching into her coat. "What happened to Leo?"

"I told you I don't know." It hurt to stand so Apollo sank back to the ground. That hurt even more so he stood back up. "Where is Will?"

"He's not here?" Cecil looked shocked. Apollo was beginning to suspect it was the only expression the son of Hermes was capable of. "Where did he go? Where's Nico?"

Apollo raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Hades' child? And here I was certain I'd only dreamt the two of you were outside my cell…"

"It wasn't a dream," Cecil assured him.

"A nightmare, then, surely."

"Um, no."

"I was hallucinating."

"No!"

"Oh yeah? How do I know I'm not hallucinating now?"

"I guess you don't," Lou Ellen muttered, clearly done with the intelligent part of the conversation. "But right now we're the best chance you've got. Which…" She gave a perceptible wince. "Isn't very promising. Where are Will and Nico?"

"Not here," Apollo muttered faintly. Lou Ellen stared at him, brow furrowed. Her eyes traveled over his face and then slowly down at his arms. She sighed, expression softening slightly. From her pocket she pulled out a pouch of something.

"Here." She offered Apollo what he recognized as a square of ambrosia. "Eat this. You'll need your strength if we're to get out of here alive."

Apollo took it gingerly, wondering if this was some sort of trick. He nibbled the edge tentatively as the two demigods eyed him. The girl turned to her boyfriend- at least, Apollo assumed he was her boyfriend- and spoke softly; "This is bad. There's no reason for them to just wander off."
"Maybe they were attacked," suggested Cecil. "It looks like Leo was knocked out."

Lou Ellen looked doubtful. "And their attackers just left Apollo behind? That makes no sense."

Apollo had to agree. He was by far the most important out of them all. Beside them, Leo groaned softly in agreement and mumbled under his breath.

"Leo!" Lou Ellen gasped. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I think," Leo muttered, pushing himself upright. He raised a hand to his head, massaging his skull. He shot up suddenly, looking horrified. "Wait! Will knocked me out!"

"What?" Lou Ellen looked disbelieving. "Will wouldn't do that!"

"Will wouldn't hurt a fly!" Cecil backed her up. "Well, maybe on accident 'cause he's sort of a klutz…"

Apollo continued to chew slowly on his ambrosia, watching with ever growing interest at the prospect of one of his sons turning crazy and giving his friends the slip… he loved juicy stories like that. He could feel himself growing a little stronger from the ambrosia but hoped he wouldn't be required to run anywhere for the time being. He'd need to book a relaxing spa getaway after this ordeal…

"Yes, I'm sure!" Leo exclaimed loudly. "Geez, what did I ever do to him? I mean, besides accidentally stabbing Nico in the side…"

Lou Ellen continued to stare at Leo as he stammered on, like she didn't quite believe what he was saying. Apollo didn't know what she was thinking but suddenly she gasped loudly enough to make them all jump. "Oh my Gods," she exclaimed loudly. "I just had a bad thought!"

They all stared at her, waiting, but she didn't continue.

"Well, I'll bite," Leo said. "What is it?"

Lou Ellen didn't answer him immediately. Springing up, she snatched Cecil's hand and yanked him back towards the door they had just burst through. "We shouldn't go out there again," Cecil exclaimed. "Lou, what's wrong?"

"There's no time!"

Despite her arguing, Cecil pulled her to a stop. "Hold on! Where are you even going?"

The daughter of Hecate twisted around, expression troubled. "I'm not sure exactly, but… what if I did actually see them on the street? Remember Will's dream?" She sighed in exasperation at their blank gazes. "Look, if I'm right we need to get back to the hotel fast! Trust me, I think Nico could be in danger."

Cecil hesitated for a second longer before nodding. Throwing caution to the winds, the two of them ran for the door. Apollo and Leo shared an equally baffled and dazed look. Leo shrugged. Not to be left behind, they both sprung up and sprinted out the door after the two demigods.

Will

Will had no tears left. After what felt like hours it seemed his body had finally ran out of liquid. His nose was stuffy and his eyes felt swollen. He hadn't felt this bad since his brother, Lee, had died.
He hoped his friends were okay. He hoped his father was okay. He hoped Nico was okay. He hoped they had all survived and escaped, even if Aminta had not. Even if he had not.

His lower lip began to wobble again and he bit down on it angrily. He hated himself in that moment. He hated himself for being weak. All his life he'd watched the people he cared about die, knowing it was only because his own abilities had failed to save them. He hated that he could not save them all, hated that he had failed where others might have succeeded. And now another one of his friends was dead. He may not have known Aminta for long, but it had been long enough to know that she was loyal, fearless, and good. Even Agnete had cared about her; Agnete, who cared about nothing and no one.

Enough is enough, he thought. Python was going to pay.

Sniffing, Will pushed himself up and looked around his cell. It was dark, almost pitch black, but he felt so drained of emotion that even the darkness didn't scare him anymore. It was impossible to see anything but he held out a hand, reaching outwards in the dark until he felt the cold stone wall. He walked slowly around it, his palm sliding over the wet, mossy surface. The whole place stank of mold and rotting things. He reached a corner and turned, still following the wall. Finally there was a gap under his hand and then his palm struck something cold and metal.

He gripped the bars with both hand and closed his eyes, resting his forehead against the cold metal. He didn't care what using his father's power would do to him. It was necessary.

On the bright side it seemed he had finally gotten the knack of it.

Warmth slowly flooded through him. He let it glide through his hands, pushing at his will. He slid his hand down until he found the lock and gripped it. Almost as if it had been waiting for it, the lock gave way easily to the power.

It released with a miniscule click.

He unhooked it from the bars and pushed the gate open. The lock dropped through his fingertips, falling heavily to the ground as he stepped out into the dark hallway.

Nico

As numbness stole his breath away, his mind turned into a pleasant fog.

Then, as abruptly as he'd seen a light at the end of the tunnel, the pressure seized. He tried to draw in breath reflexively and broke into a fit of coughing that wracked his whole body as the sudden rush of air scraped against his bruised throat. As his head cleared he managed to push himself up in time to see two shapes laying on the floor, Will Solace and Lou Ellen.

It appeared the daughter of Hecate had thrown herself at Will, knocking him clear off of Nico and the couch. They grappled on the floor for a couple of seconds but Lou Ellen toppled sideways with a cry of pain as Agnete scraped her nails across her cheek. Cecil appeared in the doorway just as Agnete sprang up and barreled towards it.

"Stop him," Lou Ellen screamed, eyes watering in pain. "Don't let him escape!"

Agnete skidded to a stop before Cecil, eyes narrowing as she saw her chance of escape evaporate. To Nico's astonishment two other figures suddenly appeared behind Cecil; Apollo and… Leo Valdez.

Isn't Leo dead? Nico thought, feeling dazed. And wasn't it… my fault?
Agnete backtracked, eyes darting to either side of the room, looking for a means of escape. Her gaze fell upon the other door that led to the back patio. She spun towards it and wrenched it open.

"Agnete!" Lou Ellen screamed from where she lay on the floor. "Stop!" The daughter of Hecate raised her hand, red sparks flying from her fingertips. The door seemed to strike something invisible and solid before slamming shut again, the handle tearing out of Agnete's grip. She stared at it, astonished.

Nico watched the scene, gasping and wheezing, trying to suck air into his starved lungs. How had they managed to find him in time?

"We're done with your games," Lou Ellen told Agnete. "Why are you doing this? You found us earlier and didn't turn Apollo back in, but you just tried to kill Nico. Why? What's your angle?"

"My angle is the same as it has always been," Agnete said quietly. She turned around slowly to face them, her expression- Will's expression- unreadable. "It will never change. The only difference is now I see Python for what he really is. I thought I had lost everything, my people, my family… I did not realize how wrong I was, but now I know. Now I know what it is like to have truly lost everything. Everyone." Her voice broke.

"Wait…" Lou Ellen looked dumbstruck. "Everyone? Aminta is… dead?"

"She is not dead," Agnete whispered, almost to herself. "I refuse to accept it. I will not."

It took Lou Ellen a moment to compose herself. "Agnete, I'm sorry about your sister. I can't say I'm sorry your plans have failed, whatever they may be-,

Agnete actually laughed at that. "Failed? Did I ever say my plans have failed? If anything they are now destined to succeed. Now… now I have nothing left to lose. There is nothing to hold me back." She took a deep breath and pulled herself up to her full height. "I will see you all again, very soon. Until then it is goodbye."

"Wait!" Cecil shouted but it was too late. Agnete plunged straight through the glass panel of the door, shards raining down around her. They clattered against the carpet and deck as she leapt over the railing and plummeted towards the pavement below.

Cecil, Lou Ellen, and Leo all ran forward to peer over the edge. Nico would have liked to look too but as it was he could barely stand. After a moment Lou Ellen drew back, shaking her head. "Unbelievable. She's escaped. Again."

Leo wandered over to Nico, looking uncertain. His eyes flickered down to Nico's side. Nico looked as well and saw that he was, indeed, bleeding. Just perfect. "Nico are you okay?"

Nico nodded dumbly. It still hurt to breathe. He stared blankly at Leo. "You're alive."

"It's a long story… but yeah."

"I can't believe Aminta's dead," Lou Ellen commented faintly. "She helped us so much…"

"I know it is sad," Nico interrupted with feeling. "But where is Will?"

"He and Aminta ran off together." Leo looked regretful. "They were trying to draw the guards away."

Lou Ellen pressed her fingers to her temple. "I think it's safe to assume he was captured then."
"Not necessarily," said Cecil. "He may have been strong enough to get away. Especially with Apollo's powers."

They all looked over at Apollo who had so far remained quiet at the doorway. Nico couldn't tell what was going through his head but his gaze was distant and troubled. He finally stirred at the sound of his name.

"My what now?" he asked with a suspicious frown. "I am certain Zeus has my powers and is keeping them thoroughly hidden. Probably guarding them with his very life, I imagine-,

"Hermes stole them," Cecil interrupted. "And then Agnete- who you just met- stole them from him, and then we stole them from her, and then-,

Apollo looked at him in mild horror, which probably would been outright horror if he hadn't been so exhausted. Nico could sympathize. "That's- that's-," Apollo stuttered like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Actually… that's sort of impressive. Really, wow. I didn't realize the almighty powers of the sun, which only keep everyone in the world alive, were so expendable."

Cecil looked apologetic but Lou Ellen looked confused. "But didn't you know? When we went through the Labyrinth of Dreams-,

Apollo looked astonished. "You went where?!"

Lou Ellen fidgeted uncomfortably under the sudden attention. "Um, yeah. But Will said he spoke with you there. You told him you lied about the keys and… you also told him not to come save you."

Apollo blinked. "Impossible. I would never say such a thing! My life is of utmost importance. I am glad my son did not listen. Don't get me wrong, he should be punished severely for his disobedience but-,

"We need to find Will," Lou Ellen interrupted. "Apollo, when we had your powers the vial accidentally got smashed. Now we think Will has your powers, and if he's been captured-,

"Impossible," Apollo interrupted. "He'd be dead if that were the case. All that energy- he'd have been incinerated in a second."

"Well, if they're not in Olympus or you where else could they be?"

Apollo shook his head, clearly worried. "Hades, if I know."

"It's true, Apollo," Nico said suddenly. "We saw the vial smash, and now Will has way more power than he did only a week ago. He almost killed himself with it when he fought off the Oneiroi. He saved all our lives. And yours. We need to save him!"

Apollo sighed. "I don't disagree with that. As much as I loathe to go near… Python… again, the thought of leaving one of my kids with him is…" He seemed to have trouble finishing the sentence. "Unthinkable."

"Do you think Python would keep him where they kept you?" Nico asked hopefully.

"And Calypso?" Leo added. Nico frowned at that but didn't ask. Actually it explained a lot…

If Apollo was surprised to hear that Calypso was there as well, he didn't show it. "There are no other cells other than those, so I'd say so. Unless he's…"
Apollo reached out and clenched the door frame hard enough to turn his knuckles white. He didn't continue and Nico was grateful for that. His blood boiled at the thought of Python anywhere near Will.

We're coming Will, he thought, wishing Will could hear him.

"At least we know how to get there," Cecil said, echoing Nico's own thoughts. "We can go through the door up by the throne room. That way we don't have to sneak past any more guards. Let's go!"

"Woah wait," Leo said. "Maybe Apollo shouldn't come- Python's still after him. And Nico's hurt. They should stay and-,

"I'm coming!" Nico and Apollo both said loudly. Nico ground his teeth at the thought of being left behind. Like hell he was staying, not when Will was in danger!

"He is my son," Apollo said. "I will not stay here like a sitting duck."

"Yeah, and Will's -," Nico broke off suddenly, unsure what he was going to say. What was Will to him? He couldn't be sure anymore... "My friend. He's my friend." Hoping none of them had noticed his hesitation, Nico defiantly shoved himself up from the couch and glared at them, daring them to argue.

"Fine," said Lou Ellen. "But eat this." She tossed him a piece of ambrosia. Unicorn draught would have been better but Nico accepted it gladly and nibbled at a corner.

"You know Python plans to raise Tartarus tomorrow night?" Nico asked Apollo quickly, tugging his aviator jacket back into place.

Apollo winced. "I am aware. Even so a part of me still hopes his plans may have changed given today's events."

"He stole blood from all the Gods," Cecil interrupted. "He could raise Tartarus right now! What's stopping him?!"

"He has not stolen blood from all the Gods," Apollo said hesitantly. "He is still missing one."

"Whose?" demanded Lou Ellen.

"He is missing mine."

The rest of them exchanged confused looks.

Cecil looked sheepish as he said, "Er, no offense, but you were the first to be captured, Apollo. Out of all the Gods, Python definitely has your blood."

Apollo smiled thinly and looked down at his palms as if intrigued by something. "My blood, yes. But not the blood he needs."

It took Nico a second. "You mean... it's not just your blood the spell requires? It also needs... power?"

"Of course," said Apollo quietly. "I mean, who am I without my power? I am... no one."

Nico didn't know what to say to that. He had never seen a God look so miserable. Or exhausted. He tried to think of something positive to say, although it certainly wasn't his strong-suit. "Well, I think it's safe to say that you being no one is the only thing saving us all right now."
Apollo didn't look very uplifted by the words as they trailed out of the hotel room for the final time, but Nico was just relieved to finally be going after Will, come what may.

**Will**

Never before in his life had Will imagined he would find himself wandering through a dark dungeon, over a mile beneath the surface of his father's city. Then again he never thought he would have developed feelings for someone as dark and brooding as Nico di Angelo yet that seemed to have happened as well.

**Nico.**

He couldn't stop wondering where he was, if he was okay, if he was even still alive. Over and over in his mind he envisioned his pale face, lifeless form… Will closed his eyes, pushing the image from his head. He couldn't afford to think like this. He needed to focus on where he was going.

There had been only two ways to go from his cell. Though it went against his instincts, he chose the darker one, the one that appeared to go deeper into the mountain. He created a small beam of light in his palm to light the way, but every cell he passed was as lonely and empty as the previous. He saw no sign of Calypso or a way out. Had she been moved elsewhere? Eventually the path turned upwards, growing ever steeper.

Will passed one cell with the door slightly ajar. He held his palm closer and saw that it appeared the dirt had been recently scuffed away. He frowned at it for a minute, troubled. Was this Calypso's cell?

*Where is she?* Will wondered anxiously.

Had Python taken her out for some reason? Will's blood turned cold. Should he hide and wait for her to come back? It was tempting but in the end he decided it was too risky. He needed to get out of here and find Python, find his friends if it was possible.

The silence was ominous and lonely- every creak, every minute rustle he heard, made him jump and tense up. By the time he reached a stone doorway, he had broken into a run and worked up a cold sweat.

His breath was swept away as frigid air tugged at his clothes and hair. He had emerged from the dark, narrow tunnel at the peak of the mountain. The golden doors of his father's throne room lay down the rocky pathway to his left. It had to be almost nighttime but the sun was hidden behind the clouds. Will shivered as raindrops seeped through his shirt. Ahead the long grasses swayed in the breeze. The familiar scent of hyacinth blooms brought back powerful memories of his cabin at Camp Half-Blood, of home. He would have given anything to be back there now, surrounded by his family and friends.

He had never felt so alone in all his life. Better me than any of them, Will thought. He wouldn't wish this on any of his siblings. His heart pounded as he jogged down the pathway. He felt incredibly exposed but there was no one in sight.

Just as he was about to round the corner a figure stepped out in front of him. Will gasped, skidding to a stop. Agamemnon. He loomed menacingly in front of Will, face cold and unreadable. His sword was drawn and he flicked the tip of the blade up to Will's throat. He froze as he felt the cold brush of steel.

Agamemnon didn't look surprised in the least to see him. "I figured you would stage a jailbreak,"
he said quietly. "Thought you'd go for a little walk did you?"

Will back away in horror. His breath steamed in the cold air between them. Could he fight Agamemnon and win? Hybris had said something about him blinding half of the guards… could he do so again? Maybe. But did he really want to? The thought of causing unnecessary pain or injury didn't sit well with him. Even if it was Agamemnon and he deserved it.

"Just… let me go," Will pleaded hopefully. "Please, I have to help my friends-;"

"Don't make me laugh."

Will took another step back. As scared as he was he was also starting to feel annoyed. "How can you want Python to win?" he groaned. "He'll kill you, like everyone else."

"I don't want Python to win." When Will stared at him in puzzlement, Agamemnon's lip curled up. "I want to win."

"Win what?" Will wondered aloud. "Does this have something to do with your past life? Being murdered? You want revenge?"

For a second Will thought Agamemnon would simply kill him right then and there. His scarred face turned purple and his eyes bulged. "Justice," he spat. "Not revenge."

"And you are willing to bring destruction upon the world for this so-called justice?" Will demanded, feeling reckless. If he didn't escape soon, there would be no escape at all. "How do you even plan to get your revenge? Your wife, Clytinnestra or whatever-her-name-is, is dead too. She-Wait." Will gaped at him in horror. "Is she back too?"

Agamemnon stared at him, looking furious. "No you fool! Do you think I'd be hanging around here if she was alive? And wipe that look of your face, like you think you are so much better than her!"

Will blinked. "Didn't she, like, stab you to death?"

"Yes," Agamemnon said dismissively. "And I must get her back! I have missed her so much."

"Umm…" Will didn't know how to respond. "That doesn't sound very healthy."

"She was merely led astray," Agamemnon protested. "She is as harmless as a field mouse. I even hear there is something called couples counseling these days… Perhaps that could help save our marriage!"

"Uh…" Unable to think of anything polite, Will nodded slowly. Another crazy demigod reincarnated? Yeah, sounded perfect. "Wait. If she's dead, how is raising Tartarus supposed to help you? Or her?"

"Tartarus will raise the Underworld," Agamemnon announced. "And along with it all those he deems worthy. They shall be restored to what they once were."

What? Will wanted to scream. "Does Hades know about this? Somehow I don't think he'll be very happy-."

"Hades will be reduced to little more than a slave like the rest of his family," Agamemnon snarled. "The time of the Gods is over, as is your father's. Now; tell me where he is."

"No way," Will said tightly. "I'd rather die."
Agamemnon didn't look impressed. "Oh I know that. That is why I shall wait until he finds you."

As Agamemnon stepped closer, Will took a step back. His back pressed against one of the laurel trees. "He won't come looking for me," Will told him. "He's smarter than that. I'm not important to him. I'm not-,

Agamemnon rolled his eyes. "That is absolutely true. You are not important. As for any secrets you keep… well, we shall see."

Will breath caught in his throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Agamemnon cocked his head to the side. "Oh? You know, there is one thing that I find most curious; How is it you managed to escape your cell?" Agamemnon's eyes glittered malevolently as he eyed Will. "Apollo himself created them and he alone has the power to open them. Beside whoever holds the keys, that is. And yet here you are. And here-" He reached down under the hem of his shirt, drawing a jingling golden key-ring from his belt loop, "-are the keys."

Will opened and closed his mouth a few times, trying to form words. "He's my dad maybe that means his- his kids can also open the locks too." He tried to sound nonchalant and knew he was failing miserably. Why couldn't ever he lie and bluff his way out of situations like Nico could?

"I find that unlikely," Agamemnon said coldly.

Will gulped. "Look, even if I thought it was a good idea, which I don't, working for Python will not help you get your wife back! He doesn't care about his followers. Sooner or later you'll end up the same as- as Aminta."

Agamemnon's face was impossible to read.

"Gaia may have brought you back, but Tartarus will destroy us all. Including you. Just let me go. I'll find my friends and we'll leave Delphi," Will pleaded. "I'll even try to convince Apollo to let you go."

"That is a nice offer," Agamemnon said slowly. "Unfortunately we can't accept it."

Will looked at him, puzzled. "'We'?"

Agamemnon gave him a cold smile. "That is right. See, unfortunately for you I did not come alone."

With a sinking feeling Will looked behind him. His heart nearly leapt from his chest. Someone else stood behind him, a figure nearly hidden in the dark shadows under the trees. Green eyes glowed under the moonlight. Python.

Will shuddered with hatred. "You," he whispered harshly. How had he not noticed him or heard him approach?

Python stepped forward out of the shadows. "I must say you are certainly full of surprises, William. And to think I have been wracking my brains the past few days, searching for answers in places where answers did not exist. When Hermes foolishly stole your father's powers and unwittingly delivered them straight into Agnete's hands I was delighted. Then the stupid girl told me you had taken them and that you would be the one to bring them to me. Fine. Annoying, but fine. However, when Zeus and his dratted daughter appeared on that Island to speak with you I was forced to conclude they had taken them back. A tragic setback, it would mean more work for me. But yet, can you imagine my surprise to discover that Zeus did not have Apollo's powers safely back with
him in Olympus? I thought for sure it was my own people who had failed. I thought they needed more incentive. Most of them are dead now but I realize that too was unnecessary. Their deaths are on your hands. As is Aminta's."

"No," Will whispered. He felt as if he had been stabbed. "You killed her. She- she-," He faltered. He didn't know what he wanted to say. Words couldn't convey how he felt. "You killed her," he said again, voice rising. "And you almost killed my friends! I hate you!"

He flung the last, childish words at Python, unable to think of anything else that could truly encompass how he felt. His body was shaking, his whole being burning with hatred. No, more than hatred; actual fire. He wanted Python dead. Will glanced down at his hands, which had begun to glow again. This time the heat burned him but he found he didn't care.

"Her death was wasteful and you could have stopped it," Python said calmly. "And now, you will help me or you too shall die. It is your choice. Agamemnon, go retrieve Calypso from her cell. We will need her."

"NO!" Will screamed, and with his shout an explosion of energy gushed from him, driving outwards through the garden. Heat seared through him, driving out all else. He saw Python get shoved backwards from the invisible force just before the heat blotted out his vision.

Something was wrong.

Perhaps he had misjudged the amount of power he had released, perhaps his already-exhausted body had simply reached its limits, perhaps it was something else he did not yet understand. He felt himself sinking into that same tunnel he had felt earlier that day, unable to let go, unable to extinguish the fire-

He fell to the ground, writhing against the agony. His eyes burned with unshed tears that dried up almost instantly in the unbearable heat. He couldn't help it. He had failed. His quest, his friends, Nico… everyone. If he died, Will wondered, what would happen to Apollo's power? Would it implode and wipe out the entire mountainside? Or would it simply trickle into the world, seeking another vessel to contain it? If that were the case, Apollo himself was the closest and most likely vessel. Perhaps it was a good thing then, if Will died…
Will

Fortunately or unfortunately, it was safe to say Will wasn't dead. As the pain began to fade, he felt himself hauled to his knees by someone with inhuman strength.

"Admirable trick," Python said, his face inches from Will's. His breath smelled like rotting carcasses and baby tears. "It's only too bad you do not know how to use those powers. They were not intended for insignificant mortals such as thyself."

Or you, Will wanted to croak. They were meant for Apollo, and Apollo alone.

Python spoke sharply, his eyes settling on the man behind Will. "Agamemnon! Did you not hear what I said before this brat so rudely interrupted? Have your men fetch the girl from her cell. Hurry."

Calypso? Will thought in bewilderment. But I didn't see her! Had he somehow missed her? I'm so sorry, Calypso. I should have looked harder. He didn't want to imagine what unspeakable horrors might happen to her now, what horrors had already happened to her. And now he was next.

"Of course, my lord."

After a few oddly long seconds Will heard a rustle and then the vague sound of static from a walkie as Agamemnon relayed the orders.

"Get up," Python hissed, pressing the blade harder against Will's throat. Though he couldn't feel much on his fevered skin, he did feel the wetness, the sharp pain ebbing at his throat, and knew he had been cut. "My plans have been delayed long enough because of your foolish actions. My patience is at its end." Will struggled desperately to do as ordered but his legs might as well have been noodles made of iron. He couldn't stand nor did he particularly want to. Either way, sooner or later, Python was sure to kill him.

But they had rescued Apollo, he told himself. So it wasn't all for nothing. As long as Apollo was smart and didn't come after him, they still stood a chance against Python. A chance to stop the destruction of the world.

But apparently the fates had a morbid sense of humor today.

A mere second after he'd had the thought, a familiar voice rang across the garden. At any other time in his life it would have been the most welcoming sound he'd ever heard, but now… now it was his doom.

"Step away from my son!"

No dad, Will begged, horror sinking its talons into him. What was he doing here? Where were the others? You have to run! Please… run.

Nico
Judging from the sight that met them, they had barely made the climb to the top of the mountain in time. Ahead of him lay the familiar beautiful garden, the laurel trees swaying like sentries in the late breeze. The image was tainted however with the appearance of two familiar and unpleasant figures looming under their branches. In the center of it all was Will. Nico's heart clamored in his chest at the sight of his friend, slumped over in Python's clutch. If he was hurt… Nico ached to rush forward and attack, swinging his sword on autopilot until nothing but a bloody pulp remained of Python. Unfortunately he was still weak and wounded, his side screaming with every step, and would probably sooner succeed in passing out than saving his best friend.

After the miserable incident in the hotel he, Apollo, Lou Ellen, Cecil, and Leo had scrounged up the remaining weapons they could get their hands on and formulated a simple plan:

1. Save Will
2. Save Calypso
3. Kill Python

Apollo alone seemed unfazed. "Step away from my son," he ordered heroically. "I must ground him for his disobedience."

Upon seeing them Python spun Will around forcefully, making the son of Apollo clench his teeth in pain as half his hair was yanked out at the roots. Nico froze mid-step as he saw the knife against his throat. Lou Ellen and Cecil also paused, clearly torn between running to their friend or staying put and glaring hatefully.

For now the latter seemed the better option of the two.

Python appraised Apollo with disdain. "Ah, there you are." A fleck of sunlight gleamed off the edge of the blade as he flexed his hand. Nico stared transfixed at Will, who in turn stared back at him, cerulean eyes large and anxious. He seemed to be trying to tell Nico something but ever it was Nico did not know. He winced as Python's grip tightened in his hair. "Do not worry for your son; I'll be sure to punish him good and proper in due time. Along with you, I might add."

Apollo seemed to take a moment to find his voice. Despite being loathe to let Will out of his sight, Nico glanced over at him. Apollo's expression was unreadable, his face drawn, eyes dark. Nico didn't like it. Apollo wet his lips. "I don't think so."

The corner of Python's mouth quirked up. "What is it, Apollo? Did you not enjoy our time together, my friend? I am rather hurt you left so early."

"You and I… are not friends," Apollo said tightly. "And you will answer for every horror you have unleashed upon this earth. Upon my home." His eyes flickered briefly to the crumbling sculptures. "Upon my people."

Python's eyes glittered. "Ah yes. I assume you refer to poor, sweet Delphyne? I do believe she misses you. I was not as kind to her as I was to you. I have plans for her as well. Fear not Apollo, her suffering shall too come to an end soon enough."

A small smile tugged at Apollo's mouth, though his eyes remained as icy as ever. "You are right about that. Her suffering will come to an end… just not before your own."

"And how will you stop me?" Python demanded. His eyes flicked down to the weapon in Apollo's hands. "With that bow you have stolen from your son? A pathetic toy, wouldn't you agree? Fitting for one such as yourself, my Lord." He spat the last words out derisively. "I know you find this
difficult to accept, Apollo, but you have already lost. The Gods have lost. Their empire is teetering upon its last legs and will fall shortly enough. While it saddens me immensely that you saw fit to charge up here, armed with nothing but those sharp little twigs mortals refer to as weapons, know this; I am still prepared to offer you leniency. Drop your weapons and help me, and I may yet spare your life."

Apollo snorted with disgust. "Spare my life? I'd rather die than be spared long enough to stick around and watch the world wither away under your atrocious actions."

"Harsh words," Python commented mildly. "Such hatred you carry within. Come now, Apollo. We all know this is much bigger than the both of us; do not let our past issues cloud your judgment. I am prepared to spare you, to give you a second chance! Would you not like to work through this? Wouldn't you like to- what do they call it?- be the bigger man?"

"No," Apollo spat.

Python feigned a look of hurt. "That is a pity. I never thought that you -the great God of the Sun, the Healer of the Incurable, Poet to the Enduring- would be so blind-sided so as to not see when someone is offering you an olive branch. Would you not like to settle this with as little bloodshed as possible? Do you really prefer…” Nico nearly bit his teeth through his bottom lip as Python cut the knife into Will's neck and a dribble of red sprouted and leaked down his tanned throat. The sight made his stomach churn sickeningly. His hand shook under the pressure from clenching his sword so tightly. "-this?"

Will didn't let out a sound but Nico could see him shaking. He appeared too weak and disoriented to move. Had he been using Apollo's powers again? Even after Nico had explicitly told him not to? It occurred to him that perhaps Python had not taken Will from his cell, that perhaps Will had escaped by himself… Nico had to fight the irrational flutter of annoyance that engulfed him. How could Will be so careless? Didn't he know how important he was?

"I'll tell you one more time. Let go of my son," Apollo hissed through his teeth, sounding very un-Apollo-like in that moment. His knuckles had turned white around the bow. Nico feared the wood would snap beneath his fist.

"I see. So you would prefer to settle this as… allies? No bloodshed?"

"You misunderstand me," Apollo said coldly. "I'd like to settle this the way we did long ago. I do want bloodshed. Yours."

Faster than Nico could blink he had the bow strung and drawn and Nico was sure he would look to see Python falling, dead upon the ground with an arrow between his eyes. But Python had moved just as fast, hauling Will onto his feet to hold him in front of him. "Go ahead," he snarled. "Shoot. You'll only kill your son. Is that how badly you want back your powers?"

For some bizarre reason, Python suddenly looked nervous. His eyes flicked to Will and then back to Apollo quickly as if he was unsure. It took Nico only a moment to realize why. If Will died, Apollo's powers would surely be released and returned to their rightful master. It would cost Apollo the life of one of his children, but then he would be unstoppable. But Apollo would never do that. Right?

Apollo stared impassively at Will's face and Nico suddenly felt scared. Apollo couldn't, he wouldn't… Nico could no longer read his expression. His face, once so open and warm, was nothing but an icy mask. His mouth turned down into a frown as he watched his son struggle against Python. Nico could have sworn he saw the bow drawn back just a little tighter.
The pounding of footsteps could be heard then and Nico sense Leo fidgeting beside him. He looked around as well. It seemed Agamemnon's reinforcements had finally arrived. There were about a dozen or so guards, all armed and ready. They surrounded the smaller group whom all still stood, frozen in the center of the garden.

One of the guards spoke. Nico recognized his voice; Hybris. "My lord, we went to the girl's cell but she was not there-"

"What?" Python snapped. "What are you-"

Abruptly Will let out a shout and slammed his head back into Python's nose. Python yelped, probably more out of surprise than pain, and released him. Will took a step forward- and collapsed, finally out of strength.

Chaos erupted.

The monsters ran at them as Lou Ellen, Cecil, all drew their weapons. Meanwhile Nico's mind seemed to have decided there to be one and only one acceptable course of action; get to Will. Apparently Apollo had the same thought.

They both made a beeline for him. Almost immediately Nico found himself face-to-face with a couple of the Python's men. Apollo managed to evade them, ducking between them with surprising agility for someone who'd spent the past two weeks being tortured, and continue toward his son, leaving Nico behind to face them with Cecil and Leo. Lou Ellen was already occupied by another guard.

He sidestepped the first blow and thrust his sword forward into the guard's chest. Pain exploded in his side as if it was he who had been stabbed. He fell to a knee, gritting his teeth against the pain. He probably would have been turned into a shishkebob by the other guard had Cecil not slammed the hilt of his sword into his skull. He fell to the ground soundlessly.

"Nico, are you-?" Leo began but Nico jump up and sprinted for Will like a man possessed.

As he cleared the two fallen guards he gained a clear view of Apollo and his son. Apollo had Will in his arms, the latter of whom appeared to be barely conscious. Nico's stomach dropped. What was wrong with him? Was he okay? Had he been injured? And where was Python?

"Will!" Movement to the side drew his attention. Python was heading for them as well, murderous hatred raging in his putrid green eyes. "Apollo! Look out!" Nico screamed hoarsely. What is he doing?! Apollo didn't seem to hear him. In fact he didn't appear to move or react at all other than to stare down at his son, even as Python closed in upon them. They were going to die. Python would reach them first and there was nothing Nico could do to stop it-

The courtyard exploded.

"Wi-!" The words died on Nico lips as he was hurtled backwards, weightless, blinded by warm light. Blinding, brilliant, dazzling light blocked Python, Apollo, the guards, Will, everything from view.

When it faded just as quickly Nico was left breathless, laying spread eagle on his back, the breath slammed from his lungs. He blinked dazedly at the spots of light dancing in the dark sky above him until he felt one of the rain drops strike him in the eye. Then he struggled up into a sitting position and stared openmouthed at the residual mess of the blast.
He had been knocked back a good fifteen feet, along with everyone else. Around him the guards lay in the grass, groaning and shaking their heads like they had been struck by a bomb. Which, Nico realized, they sort of had. He was just relieved to see that his friends were okay. Lou Ellen had dropped her knife, Leo had landed on top of Cecil in a rather awkwardly intimate manner, and Will.

Will.

It was he whom had been closest to the blast, and he was neither immortal nor insufferably strong like Apollo or Python. What if it had been too much for him?

Nico stared in stunned horror at the sight of father and son, neither of whom had been cast back by the blast, nor seemed affected in any way. Come on, Nico thought desperately, watching what little part of Will's motionless body he could see. At last he saw it, the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he breathed on…

Will was alive. For a wonderful second it was all that mattered to Nico.

Beside Will, Apollo shuddered and toppled forward suddenly, pressing his hands into the grass like he couldn't hold himself up. Nico saw with astonishment that he seemed to be glowing ever-so-faintly. All along his arms, light shone from the cuts he had accumulated, growing brighter and brighter… and then the brightness faded as they healed over. By the time it had all faded he appeared completely healed, at least on the outside.

Python was the first to regain his senses. He jumped up from the ground and ran towards Apollo, blade in hand-

"Apollo!" Lou Ellen screamed in warning. She raised her hand, sparks dancing at her fingertips. Her effort was unnecessary.

At the last possible moment before he was impaled, Apollo turned, his once-blue eyes blazing pure gold, and held out his hand. There was a burst of light… but then that was the last Nico saw of him as someone familiar stepped in front of him.

"Hybris," Nico muttered grimly.

He had a streak of blood crested down one side of his face but if it pained him he didn't show it. The commander grinned wickedly at the son of Hades like this fight was the most exciting thing to ever happen to him.

"Brat," Hybris said charmingly.

"Oh good, you remember me," Nico said sarcastically. He nearly bit his tongue off in surprise as Hybris wasted no time in swiping a massive, double-handed overhead blow at his head like he was trying to chop a clump of wood with an axe.

Nico yelped and dove aside. What the hell kind of first move is that? he wondered in disbelief. He left himself completely open and unguarded!

Hybris chuckled. "Nice stunt you pulled in the arena this morning. You did well… for a grand total of three seconds. And I am not such an easy opponent."

"Uh huh," Nico grunted, unsure what else to say. He really didn't like it when his enemies tried to have a dramatic conversation about their own battle-prowess during the fight. He'd rather just stab them in the face and be done with it. He swung at Hybris's midriff, was parried, spun and jabbed at
his calf- and made contact with the limb.

"Argh! Dammit!" It wasn't a deep cut but Hybris swore loudly and glared at Nico like he was nothing more than an annoying mosquito. "I'll have your head for that!"

Right, Nico thought. His side panged dully but he pushed it from his mind as Hybris leapt at him, pressing in. Nico went on auto-pilot dodging, blocking, swinging, parrying as best he could. It became apparent quickly that Hybris was indeed a very skilled warrior. Unfortunately Nico wasn't at his best.

After one narrowly avoided blow, he accidentally left a gap in his guard. Hybris took the opening and sent his fist into Nico's already injured side. Nico shouted in pain and fell onto his hands and knees. He slashed out blindly with his sword at Hybris's legs but didn't feel it connect. Instinctively he threw himself sideways, just in time for the blade of the commander's sword to bury itself in the grass where he had been less than a second ago.

His side burned and his lungs couldn't seem to take in air anymore. His vision was fuzzy as he glanced down at his side. When he drew his hand away, his fingers were stained with red. His head felt heavy and stuffed full of cotton…

Laying stunned in the grass as he was, Nico was vaguely surprised Hybris hadn't killed him yet.

A loud shout sounded above him and Nico managed to glance up to see Hybris turn to face his new opponent.

Apparently Leo had come to his rescue. His eyes grew wide as Hybris turned on him, snarling like a wounded mammoth. With the remainder of his strength Nico kicked his leg into the back of his knee, making his leg buckle. Nico raised his sword and brought the hilt down on his thick head. He toppled over, knocked out.

Leo stared at him, shook his head, and then offered Nico his hand.

"Thanks," Nico gasped weakly, allowing himself to be pulled up.

"Don't mention it. I- I figured I owed you one."

"Not really," Nico muttered. "I think it's I who owe you."

Leo shot him a startled look which Nico ignored. That was a conversation for another day. He looked past Leo's pale face and around for the others. Lou Ellen and Cecil were locked in battle with a couple of the guards but they seemed to be doing alright. Behind them Apollo and Python were also locked in battle. Nico watched as Apollo knocked an arrow and sent it sailing at his enemy. With seemingly impossible speed, Python swiped it out of the air with his knife.

Nico frowned. Where was Agamemnon? He squinted around and finally caught sight of the tall figure walking quickly at… Will.

Nico's eyes widened. "Hey!" he screamed, trying to draw Agamemnon's attention away from his unconscious friend. Agamemnon didn't break stride. To Nico's right Leo had the swift thought to yank a screwdriver from his tool belt and hurl it at him. It smacked him in the head.

Agamemnon paused in his track and slowly turned, anger written all over his face. He glanced from them, down at the screwdriver that now lay in the grass at his feet, and back up like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.
If looks could kill, Nico thought.

"Um, your move," said Leo, nudging him.

Nico ran at him, which was probably a bad idea considering he was injured and could barely stand, but if it kept him away from Will…

Agamemnon watched Nico silently as he got closer. Then he turned away and dove into the fray of the fight.

Nico almost tripped in surprise. Why didn't Agamemnon want to fight him? It was puzzling but Nico couldn't let it get to him just then. When he finally reached Will, he fell to his knees at his side. Will's face was deathly pale and there was still blood on his neck but he was alive.

Thank the Gods, Nico thought fervently. He wanted to sob with relief.

Will shuddered slightly and coughed. His eyelids flickered feverishly.

"Will," Nico gasped, grabbing Will's shoulder. "Will, it's okay! You're-,

"Apollo," Will coughed out. "Where… is he?"

"He's okay," Nico said urgently. "Can you sit up? We need to get out of here!"

Will shook his head weakly. "No! Not without Calypso… Python wants her for some reason! We can't leave her with him!"

Leo nodded immediately. "Stay here with Will, Nico. I'm going to sneak into the dungeons and find her."

"No." Will struggled to sit up and Nico grabbed his arm to steady him. "She's not down there! I looked but I didn't see her! I think… something weird is going on. Python was… surprised too. What if Agamemnon's taken her? He's the only one who could have let her out. What if he's working w-with Agnete?"

"What?" Nico exclaimed. "That's insane. How could he possibly sneak her out? The streets are swarming with monsters that work for Python!"

He, Leo, and Will all jumped at a loud bang as Cecil struck the shield of one of the few remaining guards.

"Not through the streets," Will muttered. "Through the palace. Apollo said there might be a way out through the palace..."

Nico and Leo gaped at him. "That's a really long shot. And if Agnete really is with her they could already be long gone-" Nico began hesitantly but Leo interrupted him.

"As crazy as it is I still have to try to find her. I can't bear to lose Calypso again," Leo told them, almost apologetically. "I'm sorry. I can't. If Will's right and Agnete has taken her somewhere..." His eyes grew dark and he shook his head. "I have to go."

Leo leapt up and sprinted toward the doors to the throne room.

There was a strangled yell and another one of the guards ran at Nico, swinging his sword. Nico brought his sword up to meet the blow, sparks flying. He thrust the other man's sword aside and kicked him in the chest, sending him sprawling. He didn't move.
Most of Agamemnon's back-up had fallen, leaving only four or so left. Nico eyed Agamemnon warily but he made no move to attack. He seemed transfixed upon the fight.

Nico watched as Apollo released another arrow but it did no good. Python was simply too fast to be struck- he dodged it easily and ran at Apollo. The God barely raised his hand in time, using the bow to deflect Python's blow to the side. Faster than the eye could see, Python struck out, the blade of his knife whistling in the air. It made sharp contact with Apollo's opposite forearm, opening a new gash upon the skin. Apollo cried out in pain and tried to take a step back. Unfortunately Python was quicker. With all of his strength he slammed his palm firmly into Apollo's chest, sending him flying.

Nico gasped and took a step forward.

"Leo, watch out!" Cecil shouted but it was too late.

Apollo opened his mouth in a soundless cry as he was thrown backwards, careening into Leo whom had nearly made it to the doors to the throne room. Apollo struck the wall with a loud crack. Leo looked dazed for a few seconds but managed to untangle his limbs from Apollo and sprang up. Without a final look back, he wrenched the throne room doors open and ran inside.

Whether it was because he was still disoriented or tired from the past week's ordeal, it took Apollo a moment longer to recover. When he did he sat up with a gasp, clapping his arm. His eyes widened at the thin trail of gold ichor stemming from his sliced forearm.

Nico had frozen as well, watching in a mixture of worry and curiosity.

What was wrong with Apollo? Was he hurt worse than Nico had thought? Even with his powers restored, perhaps he was still off-put by his time being tortured. Nico took a desperate step forward to help- only to nearly get sliced in half lengthwise by another enemy sword. He parried the blow with a snarl and slashed his sword across the front of his armor. The man's eyes widened. He glanced at Nico over to Python and then back. Then he fled. Nico scowled and turned back to the problem at hand. The sight mad his blood run cold.

Python had reached Apollo's slumped form and was raising his sword above his head.

"Dad!" Will screamed. He tried to stand and collapsed back to the ground. His cry sent a wrench through Nico's heart. He sprang forward but knew he was too far away. They were out of reach. He would never make it in time.

But someone else did.

Python froze, blade in hand, as Agamemnon placed himself in between him and the fallen God. Python's eyes blazed with fury. "Agamemnon, you fool! What are you doing? Stand aside!"

Agamemnon raised his chin. "I cannot."

Python's eyes bulged. "What do you mean 'you cannot'? Do you wish to see all of my plans fail?"

"Of course not, my Lord. You did that yourself."

Python angled the tip of his sword towards him. "You would betray me?"

Nico was certain Agamemnon would back down but the warrior's eyes just glinted. "Betray you, no. I do not believe it is possible to betray one of lesser value than oneself."
"Lesser value?" Python gave a low chuckle. "I should have known you were a backstabbing, worthless piece of filth."

"While that bit is true, it is not all I am. I am still on your side, my Lord. But you attracted too much attention. You turned the heads of the Gods. Look to the skies! See their darkness? They are planning to rain hell down upon this mountain, to destroy you and everything you have worked so hard for. I could not let that happen. So I have taken matters into my own hands. Do not be angry with me; I am merely ensuring your plans success."

Python seemed as dumbstruck by the comment as Nico. Python's eyes flicked to the throne room doors, and narrowed. "The ichor-" he hissed.

"Is gone," Agamemnon stated. "You collected everything we needed. For that I thank you."

Everyone stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Why are you protecting Apollo?" Python snarled.

"I wouldn't call it protecting so much as preserving. If you enrage the Gods anymore you'll just add fuel to the fire. Even though it is futile, they may yet try to fight. Why antagonize them more?"

Python breathed hissed out his nose as he stared at Agamemnon.

Nico had no clue what was happening. Agamemnon had stolen the Gods' blood from Python… to do the exact same thing with it? It made no sense. Everyone else seemed just as puzzled.

Python's face suddenly seemed bizarrely calm. "You are a fool, Agamemnon," he breathed. "But if you are so excited to see Tartarus and that ugly wife of yours again… be my guest.

Nico jumped as Python swept his hand forward. The blade of his knife sank into Agamemnon's chest until only the hilt emerged. Then he ripped it back out again.

Agamemnon fell to his knees, with a rattling gasp, a trickle of blood erupting from the corner of his mouth. Even dying, his eyes held a glimmer of triumph. "It… matters not. We will meet again… in the next life." The hair on the back of Nico's neck prickled at the eerily familiar words.

Agamemnon opened his mouth like he wanted to say something else, but instead just gurgled out a sticky clot of blood. He toppled forward, dead.

Python kicked his body with his foot. "That fool. No mortal can kill me. Now where was I?" he hissed, a second before an arrow embedded itself in his chest.

Python's eyes widened as he looked down at the wooden shaft protruding from his chest and for once his face was devoid of all hatred and malevolence. Instead he looked shocked, bewildered even. He looked slowly up at Apollo, whom had recovered more than any of them realize.

"Y-you-," he said, taking an unsteady step backward.

"Unfortunately for you, I am no mortal," Apollo snapped, lowering his bow.

Python took another step backwards, shuddering. Nico saw what would happen a second before it did. With one final lurching step, the rock beneath Python's foot crumbled and he toppled over the edge of the cliff leaving the rest of them to stare in shock at the open space he had been a moment before.

Nico, Lou Ellen, and Cecil all shared disbelieving looks and ran forward to peer over the edge.
Nico saw the city sprawled out like a stone maze, the monsters like ants scurrying through the streets. Hundreds of feet below, a cluster of them had converged around a small shape laying in one of the roads, a reddish stain slowly spreading out around it…

Lou Ellen's breath came in exhausted gasps. "Do you think there's a chance he survived?"

"He's dead," Nico told them.

Cecil and Lou Ellen both looked at him curiously. Nico didn't know why they were surprised. He took a deep breath. "I felt his death."

If Apollo was pleased or sad to have delivered his old enemies death for the second time in a millennia, he didn't show it. Instead he marched forward and retrieved Python's knife from where it had fallen on the ground. Gold ichor gleamed on its edges. Apollo clenched it in his fist and it began to sizzle and dissolve until the entire knife disintegrated in his hand. With a wave of his hand the few drops of blood that had landed on the grass also vanished. "Now no one can use that against us," Apollo muttered tiredly. He looked ready to collapse.

They fell silent for a few moments before a new thought struck Nico.

"Will!" he gasped, sprinting towards his friend. He fell to his knees beside the son of Apollo, hands scrabbling desperately at Will's shirt as he tried to pull him up, to see his face. "Will!"

When he finally gazed upon his face he was astonished to see tears in Will's eyes. "Will, what's wrong? We did it. Python's dead and Apollo's safe! What's the matter?"

It seemed to take Will a moment to find his voice. "It's my fault," he whispered softly. "It's all my fault. I could have saved her. I could have told him that I have my dad's powers. I didn't think about it until later when I was locked up, but I- I could have saved her."

Nico gazed at him openmouthed with astonishment.

How was Will even thinking of Aminta at a time like this? After everything that had just happened? Nico supposed he shouldn't have been surprised. If he knew anything about the ridiculous human in front of him it was that he would find a way to blame everything wrong with the world on himself.

Will was still refusing to look at Nico. Nico could see the look of pain on his face as he stared down at his hands. His lower lip trembled slightly. "Will…" Feeling brave, Nico reached out and touched his cheek, tracing a lock of blonde hair from his face. Will's breath caught for a second, his eyes flicking up to finally meet Nico's. As always he found their blueness captivating. "This isn't your fault, okay? Aminta wasn't your fault and neither is any of this. You didn't do this. Python did and now he never will again." Will watched him silently, his gaze traveling slowly over Nico's face. Nico wished he knew what he was thinking. Seeing him like this made Nico's heart throb. He did the only thing he could think of.

For once in his life, hugging another person didn't feel unnatural or weird or frightening or reckless or dangerous. Hugging Will, feeling his shuddered breaths beneath his arms, felt like the closest thing he'd ever come to having a home just then.

Lou Ellen

Tears stung in her eyes as she turned her back upon the sight of Will and Nico. She didn't know why she was crying. Perhaps they were tears of happiness, or relief, or shock, or joy. After all it was over. They had won. She jumped slightly as she felt Cecil's warm hand slip into hers. She
squeezed it gently, finally relaxing. Apollo stood at the edge of the garden, his silhouette dark and still against the sunset.

Together they wandered over to him.

Apollo had his face upturned towards the sky, shadows painted over his features under the fading light. Lou Ellen followed his gaze up towards the sky.

Far beyond the burning reds and golds of the clouds above them, she could see a darkness in the sky, blacker than any she had ever seen. It seemed to swirl like a vortex, moving towards them. Her breath shook slightly as she exhaled.

"After all this time..." Apollo whispered so softly that she almost had to read his lips. His gaze was still fixed on the sky. "You would kill me?"

"Lord Apollo?" Lou Ellen questioned.

"We must leave," Apollo said slowly, without looking at them. "Zeus is about to wipe Delphi off the map."

Lou Ellen gaped at him. "Why?" she gasped. "Python is dead! What's the point?"

"The ichor that was stolen," Apollo stated. "It's still here somewhere. It must be destroyed. Not to mention the rest of these monsters. The cities infested." His voice turned bitter as he looked down at his city. Eventually he sighed and turned to face the demigods. "Come. We must evacuate."

Lou Ellen and Cecil exchanged worried glances and reluctantly stepped forward. Nico did so as well.

Will, however, did not. His blue eyes were widened in horror at his father's words. "But Zeus can't."

Apollo gave his son a strange look. "He is the king of the Gods. He can and he will. Come on. I can get us out of here but we must hurry."

Nico stepped towards him, reaching out a hand. "Will, come on..."

But Will wasn't looking at him. His eyes were trained past him, at the ground miles below the mountain at the surround cities. "What about the people?" he asked softly. "The mortals?"

Apollo looked from his son to the cities below, frowning. "Those specks upon the map? I imagine they will be destroyed too."

Will took a step away from his father, shaking his head mutely. "He can't just kill them! They don't deserve that!"

Apollo looked sad. "I understand this is hard, my son, but you must understand. It is necessary for the greater good. We can destroy thousands of monsters, monsters that would love to rise up and try to kill us in the future. You know what I say is true; we have fought monsters since their very creation. They cannot change. But beyond that, if there is even the slightest chance that Agnete is still somewhere within the mountain with the blood we must strike now; she cannot be allowed to escape with it. I know this is hard but..."

"No. It's not hard," Will exclaimed. "It's simple. Killing even a thousand monsters isn't worth the life of one innocent mortal. Not if we can help it."
Apollo waved his hand. "Will, you do not understand. You don't know what it is like, to be a god and-.

"You're right, I don't!" Will shouted at his father. Lou Ellen wasn't surprised to see tears beading in his eyes. Will wiped them away angrily. "I don't know what it's like to be a god, to look at the world and see nothing but expendable lives. I'm a healer! All I ever do is save people- try to save people," he amended. "I can't look into the future with prophecies and dreams, not like the rest of my siblings. I can't predict fate and shape events like you can. But I can save these people, right here, right now. I'm a healer. It's who I am. But more than that I'm your son, I'm what you made me! I need to save these people because deep down I think you want to too."

Will was slightly breathless by the time he finished his tirade. He scowled and swiped a tear away like it had personally wounded him. Everyone watched as he took a deep breath. "But like you said, Zeus is the king of the Gods. I can't stand up to him, not like you can. I know you might feel like he's sort of abandoned you and left you all alone here the past two weeks, but… he's still your dad." Will took another shaky breath. "So please say you'll help me."

Silence met his words, leaving only the distant screams and howls and shouts of the fleeing monsters. Thunder rumbled in the sky as the dark clouds approached the city. Lou Ellen glanced over at Apollo but his face was unreadable as he stared at his son. To her right Cecil was also staring at Will. Nico was as well but he had an odd expression on his face. He looked… impressed? Proud?

Slowly, Apollo walked over to his son and placed an arm on his shoulder. "Don't be so quick to assume, Will. I never abandoned you, though you may think it so. I did not even know you existed for a while. When I found out I acted as best I could at the time."

Lou Ellen didn't understand what they were talking about but Will's eyes widened slightly. "The- the friend of- of my mom's," he said slowly. "That was you?"

Apollo smiled slightly. "I know us Gods and our children don't always see eye-to-eye but I have never abandoned any of my children. And I can only apologize from the bottom of my heart if I ever made you feel you were." Apollo hesitated before adding, "I know also that you sometimes doubt yourself. Yes-," he said quickly as Will opened his mouth to interrupt. "-I have heard your prayers to me. Every one of them, I might add, even those you believed I would never hear. All I have to say is that even among demigods, there are very few who would have the strength and perseverance to hold a God's power the way you have the past week."

For some reason Nico smiled very slightly at those words like he found them amusing, though he didn't comment. Apollo took a deep breath. "My point is, do not ever think for one second you have not made me proud."

With that he stood up and turned to make his way back to the edge of the cliff.

Lou Ellen's breath caught. "Lord Apollo, what- what are you going to do?"

Apollo regarded her calmly with his inhuman golden eyes. "I am going to stand here. I am going to try to convince my father to save humanity for a little longer. I am going to stand here and if Zeus plans to destroy Delphi… he will have to destroy me with it."

Leo

The halls beyond the throne room were vast and aplenty. They wound maze-like until Leo wasn't sure whether he was coming or going, but at last he found what he was looking for; a narrow stone
staircase that spiraled downwards forever. He couldn't see the bottom and at any moment he feared he would trip and fall to his death. Even so he plunged on recklessly. For Calypso. She had to be down here, somewhere. Agnete, the mad-woman who had tried to kill Nico only an hour before, had taken her prisoner. Of this he was certain.

He couldn't lose Calypso - not again. She had not been freed from Ogygia only to fall into this insanity. He had no idea how long he ran down the stairs but eventually he hit the bottom and followed the tunnel.

Unable to see in the dark, he extended his hand and let flames burst forth in his palm. They traveled upwards to his elbow, lighting his surroundings with a warm glow.

What he saw… made no sense. He knew the ocean was close but this didn't seem possible.

Dark waters licked at the boards of docks.

Docks, far underneath the mountain.

Leo shook his head in wonder. Did the others know that there were docks down here? Certainly Apollo must have… Along the farthest one a small canoe was fastened to one of the wood beams. A beautiful and familiar girl sat in it, her knees drawn up to her chest, her locks of caramel colored hair draping down her neck. Her beauty was hindered by the chains binding her wrists and a short cut upon her cheek. Otherwise she appeared unscathed. Her deep brown eyes grew wide and fearful as she stared at Leo. She half rose from where she sat in the boat.

"Calypso!"

"Leo, stay back!" Calypso cried desperately. She stood in the boat but made no attempt to leave it. Her voice sounded hoarse like she hadn't used it much over the past few days. "You must get out of here!"

Yeah right, Leo thought.

But as he darted towards her, a hand shot out and clasped his wrist. Leo yelped in surprise and spun to look at the offender only to be struck in the chest. He landed heavily on his back. He looked up to see another girl standing over him. Her long blonde hair was in a state of disarray and her green eyes swam with maliciousness.

"Agnete," he exclaimed, not altogether surprised to see her. He scurried back but she stepped after him, not in any sort of hurry. Her face was strangely calm, her demeanor collected. She held a small knife in her hand, barely the size of a letter opener. "What are you doing?"

"I grow tired of so many asking me that, Sweetie," Agnete said quietly. "Always that same question. Have none of you guessed by now?"

Agnete watched Leo quietly as he shoved himself up from the ground and brushed dirt off his shirt. The motion caught Agnete's attention. Her green eyes traveled down from Leo's face to his bloody and torn shirt, and then back up. Her brow furrowed slightly.

"You should not have followed me," Agnete whispered, taking another step towards him. "I fear it was a grave mistake."

"It's not you I was after," Leo snarled. "I don't know what part you're playing in all of this craziness- heck, I barely even know what's going on- but just let my girlfriend go, alright? She doesn't deserve this."
"Ah, but that is where you are so wrong. You love her, do you not?" Once more Agnete's eyes traveled down to Leo's shirt and back up. Her lower lip quivered slightly. What is her problem? Leo thought in annoyance.

"More than anything," Leo exclaimed forcefully. "Please. I- I know you have lost people too, so surely you understand?"

"Aye, I have lost people too," Agnete agreed. "But it is clear to me that it is you who does not understand. Losing someone you love… at first, the ache feels enough to drag you down and drown you in its depths. Many have said that such a pain fades over time, and they would be correct. Pain does fade… but in its place it leaves a void, an eternal emptiness that swallows up everything it can touch. It leaves you with nothing but your worst thoughts and fears to mingle with in the darkness." Agnete took a long, slow breath. "It has been over a thousand years for me… and I finally have an opportunity to reclaim what I lost so long ago. I will save my sister, and even…" She drifted off, eyes glazing over at the idea of her long lost lover.

As frightened of Agnete as he was, Leo could not contain his curiosity. Who had been able to capture Agnete's heart so many years ago? "Who is he? Have I heard of him?" he asked cautiously.

"Perhaps. He…” Agnete tilted her head back and took another deep breath. "He did not deserve to die the way he did. Alone. Betrayed. Abandoned. I- I will never forsake him."

"And you think if you raise Tartarus and all the dead with him, you'll finally get to have him back? It's no use. There is a fight going on up above. Apollo has his powers back and he's going to defeat Python again. And then he will destroy the stolen ichor and all your plans will be disappear."

Leo had expected the statement to nullify her but Agnete didn't seem the least bit concerned. "It does not matter if Python dies," she said smugly. "He does not have the blood. I do."

Leo stared at her in confusion. "You… stole it?"

"Don't look so surprised. I am good at disguising myself. The God's never knew what hit them and neither did Python." For the third time that night, her eyes darted down to Leo's shirt and back up.

"You're still missing Apollo's blood," Leo told her. "And Hades will certainly put up a fight if you try to raise Tartarus in his realm-，“

"Yes, Hades will never knowingly allow me passage into the Underworld. That is why I have some… inside help. As for Apollo's blood… Agamemnon promised me he would find a way to get me everything I needed. And it would seem he was true to his word."

Before Leo could ask what she meant, Agnete lunged for him, her hand grabbing a hold of his wrist once more. He shouted and tried to pull away- and felt a cold, sharp pain blossom just above his hip.

"Leo!" Calypso screamed. "Don't hurt him! You- you promised!"

"Shut up!" Agnete shouted at her.

"Leo, go! Get out of here!" Calypso yelled desperately. "Run!"

Gasp-
bottom steps of the stairs. His head swam and his hip burned from where Agnete had stabbed him.

There was nothing else he could do. His vision was dimming rapidly and if he tried to fight Agnete in this condition he would only be killed. Right now the best he could do was warn his friends.

I'm sorry Calypso.

The ichor samples were lost. Calypso was lost.

Leo stumbled up the stairs and back towards his friends, praying he didn't pass out before he got there.

Agnete

Agnete did not pursue the strange, scrawny boy even as he cast her one last dazed and shocked look before staggering up the stairs like the hounds of hell were upon him.

Her eyebrow quirked up at the thought. They would be soon enough.

As she sat down within her narrow boat with Atlas's daughter and the ichor samples, she glanced down at the piece of torn fabric in her hand. It was unexciting-boring red plaid flannel, torn and, even worse, stinking of motor oil and sweat. She would have liked to throw it overboard. She probably would have, had it not been for the single golden drop of ichor upon the stitching.
Chapter Twenty Three:

The Devil Went Down to Elysium

Will gave a low whistle under his breath, a sound nearly lost on the wind. "Damn. Looks like I was wrong to think I'd come back to a plague-ridden wasteland."

Nico had no idea what he was talking about.

An ugly knot had worked its way into his stomach and it wasn't just because he was in the middle of a five-part demigod-sandwich atop a giant bronze dragon over a hundred feet above the ground. They had departed from Mount Parnassus hours ago and with a little help from Apollo, shadow-travel, and Festus they had made good time. Nico felt thoroughly wiped out after all of it. His side ached where he had been struck by the blade, and swallowing or talking after being partially-strangled was proving painful. For most of the trip back to camp he had gazed blankly off into space, mulling over everything Leo had told them of his brief-but-harrowing journey beneath the mountain, and trying not to think about how far up they were. Twisting around, Nico glanced back at the son of Hephaestus who had a dull, inanimate look on his face. Nico couldn't blame him. He couldn't help but think he'd be rather upset too if his girlfriend had been kidnapped and taken gods-know-where by a murderous lunatic. The action of craning around strained Nico's neck, making him wince and anxiously tug up the collar of his jacket.

"Did she really turn herself into me?" Will asked for the hundredth time.

"Yes," Nico, Lou Ellen, Cecil and Leo all answered in long-suffering unison.

"Oh. Huh." Will ruminated over that, looking troubled. "Well, that's good then I guess. I- I mean, not that it's good you were attacked, Nico, just that I'm glad it wasn't me. You know, doing the attacking."

"Yeah well I'm pretty sure you're the only one who was ever concerned it was you actually doing the attacking," Nico muttered. "You're virtually harmless, Solace." Of course, he knew that wasn't necessarily true. Not after he had heard how Will had incinerated half of Python's guards (and himself). Now that Apollo had reclaimed his powers from Will, Nico wasn't sure whether to be relieved or worried. The power had obviously taken its toll on Will, but with them he had been able to defend himself at least slightly better than usual. Of course, maybe that added protection wasn't worth it in the end since it had nearly burned him alive. Not for the first time that day Nico took a moment to fervently thank the Gods that Python had not killed Will as soon as he was captured.

After all Aminta had not been so fortunate.

Nico hadn't known her for long but she had given them food and shelter, helped them infiltrate Parnassus at considerable risk to herself, and even thrown her lot in with theirs at the end. He really couldn't fathom how someone as good and honest as her could related to a murderous bitch like Agnete.

"Hey." Nico shivered when Will reached out to touch his arm gently. "You sure you're okay?"

To be truthful, Nico wasn't sure. His voice had lost the initial hoarseness after being strangled but now he could feel a pretty significant bruise forming. So all in all, he'd been poisoned, stabbed,
branded by Tartarus's hand, and strangled all in one week. That had to be a new record for him. Of course, if Will saw the bruise around his neck Nico wouldn't put it past the son of Apollo to hold him hostage in the ICU for an entire week. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"If you're worried I can give you a checkup to make sure you don't have a concussion. I should also check for hemorrhaging or any fractures."

"I'm not worried."

"Well okay but it's just that Agnete turned into me so in a weird way I feel sort of responsible. Almost like it's my fault you know? I'm sorry I-"

"If you apologize one more time I'm going to throw you off this dragon and then you really will be sorry," Nico promised.

He heard Will huff behind him. "Fine, Death Boy. But I really should to re-check your side from when Leo stabbed you."

"I didn't stab him!" Leo defended himself hurriedly. "I just... gave him a little slice."

"It's fine, Leo," Nico muttered, like it was perfectly ordinary for one to be consoling his attackers about attacking him.

"If it looks infected I may need to keep you in the infirmary to monitor the wound for a few days," Will said thoughtfully. "We don't want a repeat of those werewolf scratches."

Nico didn't like the direction the conversation was heading. "That so? In that case I'll have to challenge Leo to another duel and see if he can't finish the job this time."

"Nico, don't joke about that!" Will exclaimed vehemently while Lou Ellen began to giggled. Nico didn't have to look around to know Will was glaring at her.

"You're right of course, Will," Nico said conversationally. "If I wanted to kill myself staying in the infirmary with you would be far more efficient than anything Leo could come up with."

"That's the spirit, Nico," Cecil said, doing his best to conceal his grin from Will. Nico glanced around and was pleased to see Will now looked as annoyed as he felt.

Thankfully he was distracted then by the sight of the familiar pine trees beneath them. Farther down and illuminated by the light of the waning moon, he made out rows of cabins and beyond that the crest of a white hillside over which he could just make out the rooftop of the Big House. Through the breaks in the trees he could even make out the bleak waters of the canoe lake, the surface like a frosted mirror. From their iris messages with Jason and the others Nico had expected it to look like winter, rather than July, but it was still strange to see snow blanketing the strawberry fields when the fruit should have been in full bloom.

It was bizarre to say the least.

Leo smiled slightly. "I forgot it's so..."

"Peaceful?" suggested Lou Ellen.

Cecil nodded in agreement. "It's good to be home."

And for once in his life, Nico had to agree.
The sun was just peeking the horizon as Festus's giant metal feet touched down by the Hades Cabin, sinking a solid foot deep into the snow with a squelch.

Cecil motioned at it. "It's melting."

"That's a good sign," said Lou Ellen. "It may indicate Apollo survived his confrontation with Zeus."

"I can't believe this."

Nico glanced over, startled, to see that Travis and Connor Stoll stood under the branches of the nearest pine, clutching rolls of toilet paper and looking astonished. Why they were already awake when no else was yet, Nico could only speculate. "You're alive," Travis said. Then he looked at Leo. "And you're alive. I totally thought you were dead."

"You did," Connor corrected. He nudged his brother and held out his palm. Travis scrunched up his face as he dropped a handful of drachmas into.

"What are you guys doing?" Lou Ellen asked curiously as she and the others slid down from Festus.

"Oh! We were just about to, uhh..." Travis gulped, eyes flickering down to the roll of toilet paper in his hand, over to the deserted Hades cabin, and then to Nico. He hurriedly yanked the other roll of toilet paper from Connor's hands before hiding both of them behind his back. "Nothing! Just... out for an evening stroll."

Nico frowned at them as he moved to dismount Festus as well. Will had turned to help him down but Nico instinctively recoiled from his touch like he had been shocked. Ducking his head awkwardly to avoid Will's gaze, he swung his right leg over Festus's back and hopped down. Unfortunately he already felt past the point of completely and utterly exhausted so when his feet slammed into the grass his knees buckled and he nearly collapsed.

Except that Will grabbed him.

For some strange reason Nico didn't know if he was surprised by that or not. He quickly extracted himself from Will's grip and stepped aside. Get it together, di Angelo, Nico thought to himself. Hardly a second back at camp and he had almost fallen on his face in front of everyone.

Will watched him in confusion but seemed to shrug it off after a couple seconds. "We should go find Chiron and tell him that we're..."

His voice trailed off. Nico followed his gaze and immediately he saw what had distracted him. A part of him had forgotten that Will was not the only one who rose with the sun each morning. Most of his brothers and sisters had just trailed out of Cabin Seven. Nico recognized Kayla and Marisol among them, and breathed a small sigh of relief that Marisol seemed to be doing much better than when he had last seen her.

They seemed to notice them almost as quickly.

"Will? WILL!" Marisol screamed joyfully upon seeing her older brother. Nico smiled in reluctant amusement as she sprinted at them. A few seconds later his smile became a disapproving scowl as he was forced to jump out of the way or risk being trampled to death by the herd that was all of Will's siblings.

"I missed you," Marisol cried, throwing her arms around Will. "We were so scared."
Nico cringed as he witnessed Will get submerged in a huge group-hug of exuberant, beaming, tan people. Personally, he couldn't imagine a worse torture but as Will finally pulled away Nico saw that he was grinning just as wide as the rest of them. Hm, Nico thought with just a hint of sourness. Seriously, what was wrong with all of them?

All the excitement had drawn attention and other campers were now wandering out of their cabins to see what was going on. Some looked alarmed, probably mistaking the joyful screaming for just, you know, actual screaming, and some just looked like all they wanted was to return to bed. They were all still in their pajamas.

The thought of sleeping sounded impossibly good to Nico right about now.

Luckily no one was paying any attention to him so he was able to simply stand back and watch the proceedings with mildly detached interest. Everyone appeared to be fixated on Leo. It was just beginning to occur to Nico that perhaps they should have mentioned something earlier to everyone that Leo was still alive and kicking, however after the chain of disasters that took place at Parnassus it had simply slipped his mind.

"You're lucky the world's ending, Punk," Clarisse said, punching Leo's shoulder. Leo winced and rubbed it. "Else I'd kill you for upsetting us all like that. As it is we'll probably all die anyways, so…"

Nico felt slightly more somber after the statement.

"Hey, watch it! Where is he?" a girl's gruff voice shouted and Nyssa pushed to the front of the gathered demigods. She stopped abruptly and shook her head upon seeing her not-dead brother. "I knew it. I friggin' knew it."

"Hey Nys," Leo said, hugging her tightly.

"You've got a lot of explaining to do, Valdez." Nico winced in distaste as Nyssa wiped the dark grease stains from her hands onto a red bandanna, which she then slid on like a head band, uncaring of the black streaks it left behind in her hair. "I missed you."

"Yeah." Leo ducked his head, avoiding her gaze. Nico knew that at any other time he probably would have relished in the attention. Unfortunately the fate's had a twisted sense of humor. "Yeah, I know."

Nico scanned the crowd, searching for Percy, Jason, Piper, or Annabeth but he didn't see any of them. That made him frown. Where the hell were they?

Kayla grinned at Will, folding her arms. "Thank the Gods, you're all alright. We were so worried and then the sky turned black and then-" She took a deep breath and lowered her voice so Nic had to strain to hear her words over the chatter "-Zeus showed up. Everyone's been freaking out, thinking something had gone wrong. But clearly we were wrong. I knew you could do it!"

Will gaped at her. "Wait, hold up. Zeus is here? Right now?"

"Yeah," Kayla confirmed. "He showed up just a little before you did. I only know because I was leaving the infirmary with Austin after our night-shift and we saw Chiron."

"Are they up at the Big House?" Nico interrupted her. Well that explained where Percy and the others were as well.

"Yes but-"
Nico spun on his heel and made in the direction of the Big House at a swift pace, hearing Will and the others hurriedly excusing themselves in order to follow him.

"Gods, Nico, wait up," Will exclaimed. "How can you even go this fast?"

Nico shot him a look. How could Will be complaining when he was the tall one? Not that Nico would be caught dead admitting such a thing out loud. Besides Will wasn't that much taller than him. Perhaps by an inch or two. Or three. Maybe four. Nico refused to go any farther than that.

"You should really take it easy until I can look at that."

Nico looked at him in confusion and then realized what he meant. Without thinking he had wrapped his arm around his side. It actually didn't bother him that much but holding it the way he was had probably made Will think he was in pain.

Which he sort of was. Not that he would admit that either.

"You complain a lot," he muttered to Will and poured on the pace.

Nico had to resist the urge to reach for the hilt of his sword upon entering the Big House. The first person he noticed was Zeus, as stormy and menacing as ever, and then Chiron of course. Four other very familiar people sat around the table as well.

"Nico! Will!" Percy exclaimed, clearly delighted at seeing his friends again. Then his eyes widened. "Leo?"

Nico would have been thrilled to if it weren't for the person standing behind the four demigods.

"Hey guys!" Leo waved awkwardly. "How's it going?"

The only response he got was four slack-jawed expressions. "W- uh- you're-"

"Alive?" Jason said, as eloquent as ever compared to the rest his friends.

"Yep. That potion Asclepius gave us really hit the spot!" Leo grinned at them, clearly impressed with himself.

Nico could all but hear the crickets chirping in the background.

"I know this is touching but I am going to have to ask you to please put your existential crises on hold for the time being."

Nico had been so distracted by seeing the others he had forgotten Zeus was also in the room. The God appeared mostly how Nico remembered. Pitch black hair and frigid blue eyes. For a second he brought back memories of Thalia but the similarities ended there. For one, even on her worst day she didn't look half as menacing as Zeus did now.

"I am pleased you four have made it back safely," Chiron said warmly although he looked troubled. "I have heard some rather disturbing news over the past few days, much of which pertains to your quest. You will have to tell me about it later."

Lou Ellen found her voice first. "Lord Zeus, what are you doing here?"

"Yeah that's what we were just asking right before you showed up," Jason added helpfully.

"Indeed, you and your friends are rather hard to shake, particularly when at a meeting you were not
invited to," Zeus said pointedly.

"But-!"

This time it was Chiron who silenced them. "I do believe these children have proven themselves in the past. I trust that they can handle themselves should they stay. In fact their input may be welcome."

"Children?" Percy muttered. "I'm seventeen!"

"Yes, and I'm..." Chiron frowned to himself, apparently thinking. He shook his head. "Well, it hardly bears thinking about. The rest of you, please have a seat." They did so, Nico sitting down between Will and Jason. As soon as they had settled cokes magically appeared in front of them, which Nico picked up immediately and took a sip. The cool liquid was refreshing and sweet, much better than hardtack, haggis, dodo bird or any other vile thing he had been forced to choke down over the past week. He hadn't thought about it until now but he realized he was starving.

"Um, I don't mean to blunt but is, uh, Delphi still, er, you know, existing?" Will asked with an expression that suggested he was scared to know the answer.

Zeus's eyes seemed to crackle with electricity. "Delphi stands for now. Against my better judgment, I might add."

Will let out a breath. "Thank you. My dad is-"

"A fool and a coward? Yes, I am aware."

Nico gulped. Call him stupid but he was willing to hazard a guess at this point that Zeus had not yet really worked things out with his son.

"In fact he is almost as cowardly as he is stubborn," Zeus continued. "As it is, it is his fault once again that we are in such a mess as this. First Gaia, now... Well, it hardly bears thinking about."

"Python is dead," Will blurted out. "Apollo killed him. He has his powers back and is safe."

"And that is commendable," Zeus said. "However it does not change the fact that that female Lotus Eater has nevertheless escaped with the samples of ichor that were stolen from us. Artemis attempted to track her down to recover them but she appears to have some manner of magical protection surrounding her. I am told she also travels with another woman."

Nico looked up in time to see Leo nearly spill his coke all over his lap. "That's got to be Calypso!"

Zeus leveled a cold gaze on the son of Hephaestus. "I do believe it would have been best had you left her to her isolation, Child." Leo opened his mouth, looking angry and ready to argue his actions but he stopped. Instead of answering his shoulders slumped and he closed his mouth like he had decided he just didn't have the energy to attempt to argue his side with a God right then.

"That is not all," Zeus continued. "Artemis managed to locate her but a moment later she seemed to simply vanish. I have contacted Hades, but he is as loathsome as ever when it comes to speaking to his family."

"Wait, you think she is trying to get into the Underworld?" Nico asked, heart sinking. Asbolus had warned them that if Tartarus rose he would do so in the Underworld. It was infuriating to think they had come so far only to be hanging on by a thread here at the end. "There's no way. It's not possible. My father protects it too well."
Percy grimaced. "Well, actually it's not that hard to-

"Yes, yes, we all know you are quite adept at getting into things you shouldn't," Zeus said, silencing him. "Unfortunately it would seem you are not the only one."

"How can she expect to free Tartarus if she doesn't have Apollo's blood?" Lou Ellen asked. "Without it the others are meaningless."

Zeus shot her a dark look. "Meaningless? I think not, daughter of Hecate. You of all people should know blood is never meaningless. Blood defines us all. Even us Gods. A drop of blood from a mortal brought life to Gaia-" Percy had the grace to look slightly embarrassed here. "What do you think the blood of the Gods could bring?" Zeus frowned at Lou Ellen, who had grown pale. "But how do you know this? It is not common knowledge. Did Apollo tell you?"

"I- I guessed." Lou Ellen squeaked, sounding terrified to admit it. "I've always been fascinated with different types of magic. And when we heard ichor had been stolen, I..." She took a shaky breath. "I just assumed. But these types of enchantments are generally so complex. Without unraveling the spell-work perfectly it would be almost impossible to reverse, let alone with missing ingredients. So without Apollo's blood it isn't possible. Tartarus cannot be released."

"Perhaps not properly," Zeus said. "Like you said this type of magic is complicated. It is entirely possible Tartarus may be released from his prison, but he would still be... chained to it, you might say. As strong as he is though, even hindered it would only be a matter of time before he managed to break the chain. Then he would truly be unstoppable." Zeus shifted in his seat. "You must listen to me now; this cannot be allowed to happen. Should Tartarus rise it would be catastrophe beyond imaginable, and that speaks only for the gods. Dare I mention the destruction his reign would result in to mere mortals such as yourselves?" Zeus paused, letting that sink in for a moment. "I have already sent word to my brother, Hades, but he does not reply. I cannot lead our forces into the Underworld without his permission. He could take it as an act of hostility and attack."

"I can talk to him" Nico promised. "He'll listen to me."

"I fear it would be in vain, Mr. di Angelo. There are other forces at work here other than Tartarus. Morpheus and his cursed brothers have been amassing an army in the east. I fear they are simply awaiting the command to attack and then they will also lay siege to the Underworld."

"Then we have to prepare for war," Jason exclaimed, leaning forward on the table. "We need to make plans, allocate our weapons, strategize. I'll contact Reyna and we'll have the camps form an alliance. We did it before, we can do it again."

"No."

Jason blinked at Zeus, taken aback. "But-! What do you mean 'no'?"

"No, as in we are not preparing for war. It is too already too late. Unless Agnete herself is located, which I admit is highly unlikely at this point, Tartarus is going to rise." Zeus looked for all the world like he wished he didn't have to say the next words. "And we must let him."

Dead silence met his words.

"Uh..." Percy laughed nervously. "Sorry, but, what? Wouldn't that be, like, the end of the world?"

"As we know it."

"What?"
"It would be the end of the world as we know it. But it wouldn't be the end entirely."

"I-" Jason seemed at a loss for words. "I don't understand."

"We may not be able to stop Tartarus rising at this point," Zeus explained. "But we may be able to... minimize collateral. Extend his prison. I must ask your help in preparing for this."

"Well sure," Piper said reluctantly. "Of course we'll help."

Nico's stomach shriveled inward on itself until it was nothing but a little lump of pure dread. Surely he was misunderstanding things. After all Zeus could not mean what Nico thought he meant...

"Now hold on," Annabeth said slowly. She met Nico's eyes with her deep grey ones and he knew she had gone to the same place he had. His heart sank. He might have hoped he'd been mistaken but she was far to smart. If they'd arrived at the same conclusion then things had just gone from bad to worse. "I'm sorry, Lord Zeus, I must be mistaken but it seems- that is, you can't possibly mean that..." She drifted off, apparently too disturbed to continue.

"You understand me perfectly," Zeus said.

Annabeth had gone deathly pale. "But all those people-"

"That is why I must ask your help, Zeus told her. "Believe me, I would not make this decision unless absolutely necessary. My brother and I may not have always seen eye to eye but I know how much his kingdom means to him. Alas, to fight the impossible sometimes we must make equally impossible decisions."

"You cannot ask this," Nico whispered. "It's insane. It would change everything. Hades will never agree."

"I know," Zeus admitted hesitantly. "Which is why you have approximately twenty-four hours to convince him to see sense."

"But-!" Nico opened his mouth to argue but Zeus silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"We are out of time to argue this. There is no other option. I must go and find Hecate."

Chiron had kept his thoughts to himself for most of the conversation but now he spoke up. "Before you go, I do have one question. Do you truly believe this is the only way?"

Zeus hesitated. "I do wish it so... but yes. It is the only way." He vanished leaving behind the scent of ozone and nine upset and horrified demigods.

"I don't get it," Percy said immediately. "What's going on?"

Annabeth stared down at the table, clearly deep in thought. "They're going to let Tartarus rise in the Underworld. Then they're going to trap him in a new cage."

"Yeah, I got that," said Percy. "Isn't that good?"

Annabeth looked around at their uncomprehending expressions and took a shuddering breath. "No. His new cage is going to be-"

"The Underworld," Nico finished for her. He shook his head in disbelief. "You know, I think I figured out why my father has been ignoring Zeus's messages. Asking him to abandon his kingdom... like it means nothing. There's got to be another way."
"I understand that it seems like madness Mr. di Angelo-"

"Because it is!" Nico shouted. "Zeus is crazy!"

Percy chewed his bottom lip before he spoke hesitantly. "I know this is hard, Nico, and I don't mean to sound insensitive but... it may not be a bad plan." He met their expressions of disbelief and hurried to explain himself "Come on, I'm not saying it's great- in fact, it sucks- but if the alternative is Tartarus rising and obliterating everything, then it could work. If the Underworld is evacuated-

"Evacuated?" Nico exclaimed, jumping up. "I'm sorry, but did I seriously just here you say that you want to evacuate the Underworld? Evacuate what exactly? Ghosts?"

Percy looked uncomfortable and it was clear he hadn't actually thought this far ahead before Nico had chosen to jump down his throat. "I just mean that a lot had to be sacrificed in the last two wars and those were only against Kronos and Gaia."

Nico glared at him. "This isn't just some random-ass castle under the sea somewhere, Percy!" he yelled. He almost felt guilty when Percy flinched at the low blow about his own father's kingdom, but Nico was thoroughly pissed now and on the verge of panic. "This is the Underworld. It's not just Hades's palace or even my home that will be destroyed! It's the Isle of the Blessed, the fields of Asphodel and Punishment. It's Elysium!" Nico shook his head. He could feel his eyes burning. "It's everyone. All of those people-our friends- who sacrificed themselves and finally found peace. You want to take that away from them?! You want to condemn them to an eternity with Tartarus?!

Percy had turned pale and Nico was fairly certain he had too. He knew he was being unfair, attacking Percy like this, but he couldn't help it. Any second now he was going to lose it completely.

"But oh wait, we should evacuate them! What a genius idea; do you have any idea how big the Underworld is? I'll give you a hint; I've shadow traveled the entire world in a week before, yet I haven't come close to mapping out even a fraction of the Underworld and I've spent years exploring it. And even if we did manage to evacuate even a small fraction of the population, where would they go? Here? Among mortals? The mist may be strong but it can only conceal so much!"

He had to stop for breath at that point. His blood pounded in his ears. It wasn't until he forced himself to take a deep breath that he noticed he could actually see his breath; the room had turned ice-cold. His friends all stared at him with wide eyes, and none of them seemed brave enough to speak first.

Nico didn't care. He could feel embarrassed later, once he calmed down a bit.

"It's not an option," Nico snapped. "I won't allow it."

With that he was up and out the door almost as fast as Zeus had vanished, any desire to stick around and catch up with the others forgotten.

How could this have happened? Was Zeus an idiot? This could not seriously be the best option. He needed to get to the Underworld, hunt down Agnete himself, and not rest until she was as dead as her sister. He would throttle her with his bare hands if he had to.

"Nico!"

Will was running after him.

Nico ignored him. Hades would listen to him, he knew. He just needed to speak to his father, tell
him to send out search parties all across the Underworld until she was found. Asbolus had mentioned Tartarus would want to rise in Elysium, so that narrowed it down quite a bit as well. They could focus the search there. Perhaps he could get a message to Rhadamanthus and warn him to seal off the boundary...

"Nico, stop!"

Zeus had said Agnete was protected from discovery by some sort of magic but there had to be something else they could do.

"Gods, Nico, can you please just STOP!" Will screamed at him then.

Nico finally stopped. He stood there stoically, waiting for Will to catch up. When he did, he saw Will looked annoyed and angry but mostly concerned. "Nico, I know you're upset by what Zeus said, about sacrifice being necessary-"

"I'VE SACRIFICED ENOUGH!" Nico shouted, spinning around to face Will."I've lost so much to Tartarus already. I won't lose any more. Not to him."

Will stopped in his tracks, staring at Nico. A group of Aphrodite girls who had been watching them looked appropriately alarmed by his outburst and stopped their loud chattering in favor of whispering amongst themselves. Nico could only guess about what it was about. There's Will and Nico at each other's throats again.

Will stared at Nico, face unreadable. "Are you done?" he ventured after a few moments.

Nico flushed slightly, his gaze dropping to the ground. Was he done? He couldn't be sure. "I think so."

Will nodded slowly. Nico thought that was the end of the conversation and had just turned around to walk away when Will asked, "Hey what's that on your neck?!

Oh hell why? Nico thought. He stopped again and turned around. Part of him wanted to reach up and yank the collar of his jacket down and say sarcastically, Oh this? This is where your psychotic doppelganger strangled me!

He barely managed to stop himself. He didn't know where all this inexplicable rage was coming from but he had a nagging feeling he was on the brink of saying something he would regret. He knew Will didn't deserve this unkindness. Nico wasn't stupid; he knew he could be a bit of a loose cannon but usually he could control himself better than this. All this emotion, this rage... it had flared up out of nowhere, so unexpectedly it was almost like it wasn't his own.

"Nico?"

Nico reached up absentmindedly to cover his throat with his hand like he could somehow make Will forget seeing it.

Will stepped forward and reached out like he wanted to touch Nico's arm, but hesitated as if he wasn't certain if it would be welcome. Honestly Nico wasn't sure it if it was welcome either. Suddenly he felt drained, utterly exhausted, like all the rest of his energy had been spent in his little tirade. "I shouldn't have yelled at Percy," he mumbled, like Will could somehow grant him reprieve.

Will sighed. Apparently deciding the danger to himself was low at the moment, he finally gripped Nico's arm and gave it a tug. "Come on, Nico."
Unable to find the willpower to resist, Nico let Will lead him away. Will didn't say anything as they walked and Nico payed little attention to the direction they were headed but before he knew it he found himself sitting on the edge of one of the infirmary beds.

Reluctantly, he shrugged off his jacket, keeping his head downcast to try to conceal the worst of his neck.

Will returned with a stethoscope and some sort of band which he wrapped around Nico's arm. "Blood pressures fine," Will muttered approvingly after he removed the cuff, which had contracted unpleasantly like some sort of snake around his arm. "That's strange. Wasn't it a little low last time I checked it? Doesn't matter that much though, I guess. Take off your shirt so I can look at your side." Nico was so far beyond the point of caring he had actually moved to comply when Will suddenly said, "Actually don't. Just lift it up a little." Nico frowned at that. Normally Will would have been thrilled that he was actually obeying his orders without question so why did he suddenly- Oh.

Right.

Nico shivered slightly as he lifted the hem of his shirt to let Will inspect the cut. It was probably for the best that the others in the infirmary didn't see the handprint burned onto his flesh.

"It doesn't look infected," Will said thoughtfully. "I'm going to put some medicine on it though to make sure it stays that way." He reached into his medical bag and pulled out a jar of something, the contents of which shimmered slightly. Nico shivered again as Will carefully dabbed some of it onto his side. It stung and seemed to sizzle for a few seconds on his skin.

"What is that?" Nico asked curiously.

"A salve. It's got a bit of nectar mixed in but other than that it's just crushed herbs that Miranda leant me. Does it hurt?"

Nico shook his head mutely.

Will watched him for a moment, clearly deciding whether to chastise him or just pretend to believe him. Apparently he decided on the latter. "Fine. Now let me see your neck." He stood up, screwing the cap back on the jar and replacing it in his bag.

Nico made no move to follow his request, instinctively reaching up to touch his neck. "Why?"

Will fixed a level gaze on him. For the hundredth time and probably not the last, Nico was struck by how incredibly blue his eyes were. In the sunlight, he knew, they gleamed with gold flecks that reminded Nico of dappled sunlight shining through the trees. In the infirmary lighting, they were less obvious but no less beautiful. "Because I'm the doctor and I said so."

And just like looking into the sun, Nico could only look for so long before it started to hurt. He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "You'll just upset yourself." When Will continued to stare expectantly at him however, he finally removed his hand.

He was more than a little afraid to see Will's reaction since Will had proven himself especially good at blaming himself for everything time and time again. This time he didn't react much at all to Nico's surprise. His eyes roamed Nico's neck, flicked up to is face, and then back down. Nico couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"How bad does it hurt?" Will asked quietly.
Nico lifted his shoulders. "Not that bad."

"Is it weird?"

"Is what weird?" Nico asked.

Will shrugged, looking unsure how to put his question. "That I'm standing in front of you trying to heal you, after..." He motioned at Nico's throat.

"No. I know it wasn't you," Nico told him. What had brought this on? Surely Will wasn't stupid enough to think Nico actually blamed him for some twisted reason, right? "I know you would never..." Nico hesitated. Somehow admitting what he wanted to seemed like putting an awful lot of power into Will's hands. He was friends with Will and he trusted him, but trusting someone and telling that person that you trusted them were two very different things. One was personal. The other was, well, in Nico's experience, pretty much like confessing some sort of weakness. Still, he couldn't think of anything else that might make Will believe he was actually okay. "I know you'd never hurt me."

"Thanks. I mean, that's good. 'Cause I wouldn't, you know. Hurt you, I mean."

Nico didn't know what else to say so he settled for yawning widely.

"You should get some sleep," Will said immediately. "As for your neck, it doesn't seem like there's anything wrong other than the bruising. I could try another salve but honestly I'm not sure it would do much good. I think it'll just have to heal by itself. Or I could always try to-" Will reached out all of a sudden and Nico flinched away at the unexpected motion. Will retracted his hand immediately, looking slightly shocked. "Sorry, I-"

"It's fine," Nico muttered, deciding right then and there that he'd had enough of the infirmary. He snatched up his discarded jacket from beside him. "It'll heal. Honestly, I just want to go get some sleep."

Will nodded, clearly upset. "Oh. Well- Okay. That's fine."

"Bye," Nico muttered awkwardly. He hurried for the door leading outside, slipping his jacket back on. Part of him wanted to look back at Will but he managed not to. Barely.

Nico's cabin had never felt so unwelcoming. Over the past week he had- dare he say it- grown used to the presence of having others around, even when he slept. Now the dark corners held unanswerable questions and his bed looked cold and forgotten, the way beds always did when they hadn't been slept in for a while. In a way the bleakness reminded him of the night spent in the Labyrinth of Dreams, when he and Will had been stranded alone with nothing but the horrors of the past as company.

He felt a misplaced pang in his heart. He felt he had grown close to Will during their quest, perhaps closer to him than anyone he'd ever known. Well, besides Bianca or Hazel of course. He'd opened up to him, albeit unwillingly most of the time, and told him things he'd never dared reveal to anyone. He liked Will. So why did he suddenly have this sick feeling in his stomach?

Nico groaned under his breath and wandered to his coffinesque bed, collapsing onto it and laying there like its ideal sort of occupant.

There it was he lay until he finally drifted off to sleep, but as the minutes lengthened he began to feel incredibly cold in his extremities and he could have sworn he heard a voice right before he fell asleep.
In his dream he stood in a place, though it took him a few moments to recognize just where that place was. A fire roared in an ornate hearth, dark tapestries looming over the walls. He was not alone either. A centaur stood in the center at a large round table, eyes closed, apparently deep in thought.

Nico glanced out the window to see flurries of snow drifting lazily in the wind, just as the door sprang open and a girl wandered in. She stomped snow from her boots, unminding of the mess they left on the floor, and brushed a tassel of red hair out of her eyes.

"It is time," said the old Oracle of Delphi. "We must make our decision."

Then he was standing in the middle of a crowded street. Archaic buildings lined the dirt road but most of the people seemed to be dressed up in ornate tunics or colorful sashes. The crowd parted suddenly and Nico saw that some sort of procession was coming through, led by a young man, perhaps in his late teens, atop a large bay horse. He was followed by a group of children who all seemed to be equally well dressed. They entire group was surrounded by guards, although most seemed to be situated around the man in the lead. Beside Nico stood the little blonde girl he had seen before. Tears streamed down her cheeks but her face was lit with a bright smile. Her eyes were fixed intently on the procession. As Nico watched she raised her fingertips to her lips and kissed them before extending her palm outwards. Something down the road must have caught her attention then, because she turned her head and for a brief second Nico caught the familiar vivid green of her eyes.

The buildings and crowd seemed to fall away, the clamor of the crowd fading until she was all that was left, except now she was standing in the middle of an endless field of wheat. Her hair matched the hue of the grass almost perfectly, both shimmering golden in the sunlight. He watched as she spun around, head thrown back and body shaking with laughter, until the golden fields began to smolder and they went up in flames around her. The fire flickered and danced alongside her until she too was consumed in the blaze.

Nico woke with a shout, clutching his shoulder. The skin felt hot and feverish even under the fabric of his shirt so he pulled back the layer to look, almost fearfully. The hand print was still there, same as it had always been. Carefully, he slid his hand down and pressed the cold skin against the inflamed, hoping to ease the burn. Another flutter of rage channeled through him. Why did Tartarus choose him to be marked like this? Would he have to carry it forever, reminded of that place every time he took off his shirt? If he did he was certain he would lose his mind!

He thought back to the girl in his dream, of the manic fire in her eyes and the way she had twirled joyously as the world burned around her. It was her doing, all of this. Why he was seeing visions of Agnete- for he was certain that the girl was Agnete- as only a child, he didn't know. What he did know was that Elysium was in imminent peril. For that matter the entire Underworld was in danger. And that meant his father needed him.

He knew his duty.

His time at camp was over.

It didn't take him long to pack. He wanted to travel light and conserve as much strength as possible which meant he was limited to nothing more than his sword and a bag that consisted of nectar, ambrosia, and a few snacks (because the food in the Underworld generally sucked and he didn't want to have to eat any more of Demeter's cereal). A glance at the clock beside his bed told him he had slept most of the day away but there was still a couple hours until sundown.

He had just sat down on his bed, prepared to wait it out, when a thought struck him. Should he say
goodbye to Will? The idea left him with mixed feelings. On one hand he felt like he might owe it to him since they were friends, but on the other... well, he really wasn't good with goodbyes. It would just leave him upset and emotional and he couldn't afford to be distracted right now. So that settled it. No goodbyes.

By the time the sun was getting ready to set he was feeling more than a little anxious to be off and had just opened his door only to come face-to-face with-

"Oh, hey Nico," Will said in surprise, lowering his hand to knock.

Well crap. There went his plans to sneak off unnoticed. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"I came to check on you," Will admitted. "You looked really out of it in the infirmary and I figured you were still asleep when you missed dinner. But then I just got this weird feeling and thought I'd better make sure you're... alright."

"Hmm. You should really see a therapist for your compulsive urge to stalk people, Solace." Nico couldn't help the snide remark but it really was too easy to tease Will.

Will ignored him, his eyes drifting to the bag Nico had dropped just inside the doorway. "What are you doing?"

"I'm..." Nico hesitated, wondering if Will would believe him if he tried to lie. "I just wanted to get out. Clear my head. Figure out what to do next, I guess."

"Looks to me like you already have," Will said quietly, taking Nico aback. Will knew he was leaving and he wasn't angry about it? Nico was sort of impressed. Will chewed his bottom lip, before he looked up to meet Nico's gaze. "You were really gonna leave and not tell me? After everything?"

"I- I-" Nico was at a loss for words. He wasn't sure how to explain his thought process to Will in a way that he would understand or at least wouldn't hurt his feelings. "I know you're always so adamant about me accepting this place as my home but... I just don't know. Maybe I'll feel that way one day but right now, well, I know where I need to be right now. And it's not here." Nico watched Will's face as he spoke, but his expression was closed-off and unreadable.

Unable to think of anything else to say, he swallowed hard and looked down at the ground. And this here was exactly why he had wanted to avoid goodbyes. He blinked hard, willing the sudden sting in his eyes to go away.

Will noticed his expression. "What's wrong?"

Nico shook his head, mutely. He was having trouble finding words at the moment. "It's stupid. I'm just... mad at myself for taking so long to come here. I was so scared of everything, the world, who I was. Who I am," he amended. "I resented everything about this place for so long. It reminded me of everything I've lost. It just felt like another place I could never fit in."

Will watched him sympathetically but didn't offer commentary. Nico scowled at him and his perfect blue eyes and perfect blonde hair and perfectly open and unassuming expression.

"This is all your fault, you know," Nico shot at him, desperate to goad him into some sort of a response.

"I beg your pardon?" Will raised his eyebrows incredulously. "What's my fault?"
Nico turned to face him, crossing his arms smartly. "All of this. I didn't care about anything or anyone before." Almost anyone, he amended grudgingly in his head. The thought didn't make him feel any better. He was still sort of mad at Percy.

He fell silent and glared past Will, out at the forest where he knew the canoe lake. It seemed like only yesterday he and Will had sat out there together and Will had convinced him to stay at camp a little longer. Speaking of water... Suddenly an image of Will, shirtless and soaked and kissing him on a little tropical island shrouded in mist rose from its midst.

Nico's scowl deepened.

"Don't be an idiot, Solace. It all just means so much more to me now, I don't want to lose it." Okay, now he felt like he was actually going to start tearing up which was thoroughly unacceptable. He settled for sniffing softly and hoping Will didn't notice.

"We achieved what we set out to do," Nico reminded him. "You saved Apollo's life. We couldn't have known about all this other crap going down. Python's dead now and even if Agnete did escape with the blood, you bought us more time. That counts for something."

"Oh yeah?" Will uttered unhappily. "Is that why you're leaving?"

"I have to, Will," Nico said softly. "You heard what Asbolus said; if Tartarus rises it will be in Elysium and from there he will move to take all of the Underworld and after that the rest of the world. Even if Zeus's plan works it still should only be a last resort. And I'm not quite ready to give up on my home yet. My father needs me."

Will stepped forward and grabbed his arm to stop him. "Hades is a god and he has an army. I need you here."

"Even Gods aren't invincible," Nico reminded him. "And an army doesn't have as much a chance of finding Agnete as I do. They don't know her as well."

"None like you," Nico pointed out. "You're the best."
Will looked like he was struggling to find a logical argument at this point. "Yeah, well if all the fighting is in the Underworld then that's where I should be… to help heal people."

Nico frowned at him. "Yeah but… everyone there is already dead."

"Oh yeah," Will muttered. "Didn't think about that. Okay, but-"

"Will." Nico stepped forward and looked him dead in the eye. "I get it. You want to help. But this is something I have to do."

"You can't just leave!" Will said miserably. "I need you."

Nico didn't know how to answer that. Will needed him? What for? Helping in the infirmary? Emotional support? Or perhaps what he actually meant was that he needed Nico the same way Nico felt he needed him, needed him because after knowing him, he now knew what he'd never realized he'd been missing. But that seemed like a bit of a long shot.

He could have stood there speculating about the meaning behind the words until the end of time without reaching any solid conclusion. So he settled for stepping forward and hugging him tightly.

"I don't want to lose you either, Will," he whispered. "But I have to go. I'll be back soon."

With a heavy heart he released him, stepped back, and let the shadows consume him.

The Underworld was already in a state of utter disarray.

That much was obvious to Nico as soon as he stepped through the great obsidian doorway into Hades's throne room and he was met with quite the congregation of people. Lord Hades sat upon his throne and around him stood a dozen or so others. Several were skeletal warriors and one a ghost whom he recognized as a commander of the Underworld's army. Others present were Persephone and her mother, Demeter. Along the far wall Rhadamanthus stood side by side with one of the judges from the judgment pavilion.

"My son," Hades spoke. "I thought I sensed your presence enter my realm a few minutes ago. Rhadamanthus has told me much- I hear you've had quite the adventure out there over the previous week."

Before Nico could respond Demeter spoke loudly, regarding him with an expression as equally pinched as her daughter's. "Yes, yes, the boy went on a real quest, finally. It was about time. I've been waiting for him to measure up to those other brats-"

"Silence woman," Hades ordered and Demeter fell silent with an indignant huff. "Nico speak."

"Yes, I went on a quest." Nico knelt and bowed his head. "Father I have much to tell you. We spoke with-"

"I already know, son. Rhadamanthus and Asbolus here have filled me in on many of the details."

"Oh." Nico blinked as he noticed Asbolus for the first time among those gathered. "Right. I have returned to help defend against the threat to the Underworld."

Hades watched him stand before muttering, "The threats in the Underworld would be more accurate."

"What do you mean?" Nico asked, alarmed. Had they been already attacked? His first thought was
of Agnete. Had she already made her move? What had he missed? "On our quest we met a woman, Agnete."

"Yes, my brother did warn me of her." Hades laced his fingers. "The fool. How a lowly child like herself did outmaneuver him, I do not understand. It matters little now. I shall see her dealt with soon enough."

"She is not the only one though," Rhadamanthus explained to Nico. "Asbolus has warned us of three traitors within Lord Hades's realm."

"Three?" Nico asked, shocked. "Who?"

"I am uncertain," Asbolus admitted. "The prophecies are too clouded. I am only sure that they will bring great destruction upon the Underworld if they are not caught quickly."

"Great destruction," Persephone quoted slyly. "A polite way to describe the rebirth of Tartarus and downfall of the Gods. Lord Hades, should your grandfather truly be reborn here-,

"He won't!" Hades snapped, making her flinch. "I would sooner fall then watch my kingdom, our home, befouled by him." Nico had rarely seen his father try so hard to control his obvious fury... but there was something else there too, something he had not seen. "If Tartarus believes himself capable of rising here, in my territory, then he is in for a surprise. I will not be so easily tricked as my brothers."

Rhadamanthus moved away from his spot along the wall, looking more troubled than Nico had ever seen him. Not that he could blame him. He turned to Hades and bowed his head in parting. "My Lord. If you will excuse me, I should depart and seal off the Isle of the Blessed. If anyone attempts to infiltrate... I shall know."

He left, leaving Nico and the others to ponder their devastating predicament. More lies, more deceit, more betrayal. Would it never end?

Demeter brushed some stray wheat from her dress. "I take it this means you have still not seen reason and agreed to Zeus's proposition? No? Very well then. We shall remain as fools here and perish. Even so I shall do my part. I can bring cereal to the troops. Good cereal, too, with extra fiber to keep them energized and-"

Nico tuned her out, sorting through his own thoughts. Three traitors, all of them already within the Underworld. Absentmindedly Nico ran a finger over the hilt of his sword. Whoever it was, wherever they hid, he would find them. Agnete may have succeeded in leading them on a wild goose chase but this time...

This was not a game he could afford to lose.
Chapter Twenty-Four: The Fortunate Isle

1 Hour Ago.

It was safe to say Will's day had royally sucked. No, scratch that, his entire week had sucked.

Just when he had thought a crisis had been averted- Python had fallen dramatically to his doom (he had spent most of the ride back already working on a celebratory poem in his head) and Tartarus's freedom had been thwarted- Leo had ended up getting slashed West Side Story-style, Calypso had been kidnapped, and Zeus had appeared to explain to them just how much they all really sucked.

So yeah. His whole week had sucked.

Well, most of it. Like 98% of it.

Actually, kissing Nico di Angelo had possibly been one of the top highlights of his entire life.

Unfortunately he was 100% sure Nico hated him right now.

He hadn't missed the way the son of Hades had avoided making eye contact with him, or the way he had flinched away from his touch. Actually Will was pretty used to that from him... just not recently. After Nico left he had remained in the infirmary, organizing, restocking, and just generally catching up on all that he had missed. None of it was enough to get his mind off more troublesome matters. When Nico hadn't showed up at dinner he had considered going looking for him but ultimately decided against it. If Nico really was avoiding Will then perhaps the best thing Will could give him, painful as it may seem, was some space.

Dammit Agnete, Will thought bitterly. Tricking and betraying Zeus? That was one thing. Tricking and betraying them? That was... actually not very surprising. Attacking Leo and kidnapping Calypso? Rude, but what could ya do? Doppelganging Will, strangling Nico and probably sabotaging any chance he'd had at a relationship with the son of Hades? Well that really ticked Will off.

It was with looks of surprised apprehension that Jason, Piper, Percy, and Annabeth wandered into the infirmary that evening only to find Will rather ferociously preparing bandages.

Will froze in the middle of his savage bandage-ripping to look at them in surprise. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Nico wasn't at dinner." Annabeth said expectantly.

"Oh, I didn't notice," Will muttered spitefully. He had noticed. Of course he had noticed. He noticed everything Nico said or did like he had some sort of undeniable mental link to him. But after the painful experience that was Nico's checkup, he had a horrible nagging feeling that the son of Hades was avoiding him. Nico had said he wasn't angry but...

He has every reason to be.
Will noticed Piper looking around the infirmary with scrutiny like she was searching for something.

Will raised an eyebrow at her. "What, you think I'm hiding him in here? You know he hates the infirmary."

"Well yeah but-" Percy clamped his mouth shut when Annabeth nudged him harshly with her elbow. "I mean, no. I can't think of any reason at all Nico would want to be in here." He cleared his throat awkwardly. Will noticed that Jason was still looking around like he didn't believe him. What, did they believe Will was trying to protect Nico from them in his state of distress? Will snorted at the thought.

"He's not in here," Will reiterated snappishly. "Why are you looking for him? And where's Leo? I need to check his side again too. What is it with all my patients skipping their appointments?" He was almost relieved Nico wasn't here, knowing the son of Hades would have some snide remark to answer that question.

Jason sighed. Will noticed that his glasses appeared to be stained with motor oil. Grimacing, Jason tugged them off and wiped at them with his shirt. "Leo's currently with Nyssa trying to see if they can develop some sort of tracking device for Calypso. I don't know, don't tell him I said this but it sounded like a bit of a long shot. Look, we know Nico's upset but we sort of need to talk to him. You know, gotta make plans and stuff."

"Okay. And?" Will frowned up at them, hands pausing in the middle of tearing another bandage. "Uh-uh, no. Sorry. You can't make me go talk to him." He ripped the bandage in half and threw it in the heap with the others, probably with more force than necessary. It missed and landed on the floor. Will cursed and bent to retrieve it.

Piper and Annabeth exchanged worried glances. "Will, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Oh... you and Nico didn't get in another fight did you?" Piper asked, looking sincerely concerned.

Will hesitated. "No." He wasn't inclined to add anything else.

"Because I thought you guys were friends," Piper prompted.

"We are," Will emphasized. "At least, we were. I think. I don't know. I probably ruined it. Gods, I'm such an idiot!" He flopped his head into his hands miserably. The roll of bandages flopped off the counter and unrolled across the floor like a little deplorable runway for Will's pathetic-ness.

"What happened?" Percy asked him.

"My evil doppelganger tried to kill him," Will muttered miserably, like it would help clear things up for them. "Do you think that would make him mad at me?"

"Uh, what?" Percy chuckled slightly. "Come again?"

"It was Agnete..." Will launched into a brief explanation of what had happened.

"That's ridiculous," Annabeth said immediately. "You didn't do anything."

"I know," Will exclaimed. He frowned down at his hands. "But he was so closed off when I met
him. Not just emotionally either. What if I've... been pushing too hard, you know?"

"I can't say I really know Nico that well," Piper admitted. She stepped forward and nudged the fallen bandage-roll with her foot, rolling it back up. Will took it reluctantly when she handed it to him. "But I do know that he's tough and he wouldn't let himself get pushed into anything he wasn't comfortable with. He's got a way with letting people know what's on his mind, believe it or not."

"I know," Will sighed. "But hypothetically, if some person - a hypothetical person, of course- kissed him, hypothetically-"

Percy choked violently. Unfortunately Annabeth's not-so-subtle kick in the shin wasn't quick enough to stop him from asking, "You... kissed... Nico?"

"Uhhh... Maybe. Hypothetically?" Will suddenly felt uncomfortable. Crap, should I have kept that a secret too? He wasn't stupid. He knew that Nico could be very private about some things especially when it came to the details of his personal life. He had noticed it particularly when they had sat outside Asbolus's hut in Elysium and Nico had turned beat red upon being informed that Will was gay and then had progressed to a worrisome shade of purple upon admitting that he himself batted for that same team.

Will had been nothing short of delighted upon hearing the admission.

"Well... what did he do?" Piper inquired matter-of-factly, moving to sit next to Will. Will figured if anyone had decoding-the-behaviors-of-cute-guys down to a science it was her. "After you kissed him, I mean."

"Um..." Will had a brief flashback to the Island they had visited lost at sea, of standing in the waist deep water, bathed in moonlight and feeling Nico pressed against him, his skin warm against Will's, of running his hands through the dark locks of hair... it had felt like a dream, all the way up until Will discovered the horrible mark that had burned upon his skin and the frightening promise that went along with it. "We got in a fight."

Piper, who had been smiling quietly to herself like she was expecting to be entreated to some sappy and possibly graphic description of their first kiss, looked suitably taken aback. "Oh. Well, that's interesting, I guess-"

"Wow, it was that bad?" Percy asked blatantly, eyes wide.

"Yeah," Will sighed, before realizing what he meant. "I mean no! It's just-" He hesitated. He couldn't very well tell them about Nico's secret. If Nico wanted to keep his deal with Tartarus to himself than it was his own business. Or did the others have a right to know? "Well, you know Nico..." He trailed off. It sounded like a poor explanation even to his own ears.

"Yeah, we do actually," Annabeth agreed unexpectedly. "And I can't see him holding anything Agnete did against you. Nico can be stubborn and, er, irritable- no offense to him or anything-"

"No, I'm sure he'd take it as a compliment," Percy said.

"-but he isn't spiteful. I can't imagine him being mad at you for something someone else did." Annabeth frowned deeply after her words. "He was probably just upset by the news about the Underworld. I wouldn't take it personally, Will."

Annabeth was trying to be kind, Will knew, but her words didn't comfort him much. Nico had been withdrawn even before they had spoken with Zeus. Will remembered with a sinking feeling the way Nico had flinched away from his help when they'd first landed at Camp on Festus. He cleared
his throat. "Yeah, I suppose. I was going to go check on him at dinner, but now I think it would be best if I just gave him some time. And space."

"Just not too much time," Jason interjected. "Cause the world's still about to end. We need to speak with him."

"What about?"

Percy grimaced. "To start I figured I might owe him an apology. He... seemed pretty pissed at me earlier."

"I don't think he was that mad at you," Will told him honestly. "Zeus just freaked him out. The Underworld is his home. It means a lot to him. To be honest, I don't like it either. We can't just let the Underworld be destroyed."

"We agree," Jason stated, taking Will by surprise. "That's why we need to talk to him."

"You have a better idea?" Will asked hopefully.

"I have a different idea; we fight." Jason said. Reflexively he reached for his sword, as if reassuring himself it was there. "Both camps together, again. Whether it's 'better', who can say? I already notified Reyna of what is going on and she agreed. She's not happy. She..." Jason drifted off, expression clouding like he wasn't sure if he should continue.

"What?" Will asked.

"It's nothing," Jason said briskly, seeming to have pressed whatever was bothering him to the back of his mind. "The important thing is the Romans will fight with us. Now we just need to start preparing. Organize weapons, allocate rations, the whole lot."

"Not to mention figuring out how to get an entire army into the Underworld," Percy added. "Hades won't like that idea."

"We'll have to hope he likes it more than the idea of the Underworld being obliterated entirely," Annabeth said darkly. "We figured Nico could help convince him. He's done it before."

Will knew that to be true. He could still remember the Manahttan Battle, surrounded by chaos and monsters. Just when all hope had seemed lost... Will smiled slightly. "Didn't he end up opening a giant chasm in the streets?" Will hadn't been there for that part sadly. He'd been on the sidelines, attending to the wounded, trying to heal Annabeth from her mishap with Kronos.

"He does like to make an entrance," Annabeth said briskly. "And to break things."

"Yeah, he also put that giant crack in the dining pavilion when he first got here," Percy added.

"He did?" Will exclaimed, somewhat amused at the idea. He felt weirdly proud now, knowing that Nico had been at camp for all of one week and had apparently left a mark. Literally.

"Exits on the other hand..." Percy mused, gaze unfocused from some old memory. "He always tries to slip away unnoticed."

Will had noticed that as well. It was hard to believe that not two weeks Nico he had followed Nico into the forest and sat beside him at the canoe lake, trying to convince him not to leave. He wasn't sure how he'd known that Nico was trying to sneak away at the time. Perhaps he'd tried to ditch Will so many times during his three days in the infirmary that Will had mastered the art of heading
him off. It was almost like some sort of sixth sense to him now. It was also partly the fact that Nico hadn't shown up to dinner that day either-

Will's eyes widened.

"Aw crap," he muttered. With a sudden burst of energy, he tossed the bandages back into their drawer and leapt up, ignoring the startled looks from the others as he ran for the infirmary door.

He just hoped he wasn't too late.

Nico

Now.

"They looks like ants," Nico mused aloud.

A cool breeze ruffled his t-shirt, setting the hairs on his arms on edge. He and Hades stood upon the balcony off the tower of the East wing of the black palace. After the meeting had been dismissed Hades had requested to speak with Nico in private and then whisked him up here in a vortex of shadows. Far below them ghosts, skeletons, and all other manner of dead beings scurried, appearing not unlike an anthill that had been unexpectedly disturbed under someone's foot and thrown into unrest. Particularly if that someone happened to be Tartarus.

Nico shivered, not welcoming his comparison. "It's not enough is it? They're no match for Python's army."

And there was a lesson in and of itself; cut off the head of the snake and the body did not always flounder. Not if that snake had been backed by other powerful allies, such as Morpheus. Or Agnete.

"No," Hades said eventually. Nico could tell he was loathe to admit it. "I fear it is not enough."

"Have you spoken with the rest of the Gods?" Nico couldn't help but ask. "Has Zeus-"

"Zeus," Hades interrupted harshly, "-hears no one but himself. He would rather turn-tail and run like a frightened mouse, than fight. I am not surprised. It is his nature. It has always been his nature." Hades' voice was petulant, bitter. Nico chanced a glance at his father. His eyes, always so dark, were as somber and bleak as Nyx herself.

"What about the camps?" Nico suggested. He ran his thumb over the ring on his finger, comforted by the familiar metal band. "If they were allowed entrance into the Underworld we could join forces with them. It could give us a chance."

Hades looked affronted by the very notion. "Absolutely not. I will not further jeopardize our borders nor allow the living to come traipsing through the realm. It is already teetering on the brink of chaos. We need not add to it."

"But-"

Hades silenced him with a look. "Even if I did allow it- I said if- they would never agree to such a plan. You heard what Zeus said; he would sooner abandon Elysium to Tartarus than defend it. This place means nothing to him. I know you wish it were not so, but the camps loyalties lie with Olympus as well."
"That's not true," Nico countered. "They would fight for you, for this place. They have friends and family down here, people they don't want to see abandoned to Tartarus."

"Even if they agreed they would need to prepare," Hades reminded him. "This is the sort of planning that would have had to have happened weeks ago, if not months. It is too late."

"Let me try," Nico pleaded. "I can send an Iris message to Will and-

"Will?" Hades interrupted, frowning. "Who in my own name is Will?"

Nico blinked, taken aback by the question. He supposed his father would have no idea who the son of Apollo was. "I mean Percy," Nico amended quietly. "Or Jason. I can convince them to come, I know it and then I'll-"

"You'll what?" Hades demanded, turning on him. His voice was harsh. Nico resisted the urge to take a step back. "You'll have achieved nothing besides more death. Listen to me, Nico; do not condemn your friends to meaningless deaths. It is not worth it. There is a better way."

"There is?"

"There is," Hades took a deep breath and gazed out over the balcony into the distance, beyond his armies, beyond the madness down on the ground, like he was willing himself to see past it all. "This woman everyone speaks of, this Agnete, if she evades capture, if she succeeds, I do not trust to hope that Zeus's plan will go without a hitch either. I need you to find her, put a stop to her plan. I am telling you this because I know I can trust you, my son. You have proven yourself to me before, succeeded more than I ever could have hoped. That is why I am assigning you this task; find these three traitors. Discover their identities and bring them to me. If they fight, if you can't bring them... kill them."

Nico let out a nervous breath. No pressure then. "I understand," he said.

"Promise me," Hades said, gripping Nico's shoulder. His grip hurt, not that Nico would ever complain aloud. "Swear it. You must stop them."

Pulse fluttering, Nico inclined his head. "I swear. I'll do my best."

Hades released his shoulder and stepped back, looking pleased. He glanced once more over the edge of the balcony, down at the dark commotion below. "You are right. They do look like ants. I find it is too easy to feel invincible from up here, indestructible. And then other times...

Nico looked at him questioningly when he didn't continue.

Hades shook his head as he turned away from the edge. "Other times it hits you, that all these ants are the only ones standing between you and total annihilation." With that depressing statement Hades disappeared into the shadows, leaving Nico to stare down at the armies of the Underworld as they prepared for battle.

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Will

Will stood outside the Hades Cabin door, which was still open, staring blankly into the space Nico had occupied moments before. The dark recesses of the Hades Cabin stared back at him hollow and empty. He didn't even react when he heard the other's approaching. Apparently they had figured
out where he was heading and chosen to follow.

"Did you find Nico?" Percy asked him, coming to a stop at Will's side.

Will swallowed down the lump in his throat. "I found him," he admitted, voice slightly hoarse. "He's gone."

"Crap," Jason said under his breath, although he didn't look particularly surprised. "I should have known. Hang on, this might actually be a good thing."

How is Nico being gone ever a good thing? Will wondered miserably. "Why?"

"Because he probably went to the Underworld," Jason said. Inexplicably he started feeling inside the pockets of his jeans. "I'll Iris message him and explain. Does anyone have a drachma on them?" Piper did. She tossed it to Jason, who caught it and started heading back to his own cabin.

As Percy and Annabeth moved to follow him, Will couldn't help but blurt out, "Percy, can I speak with you?"

Percy turned back to Will, looking faintly startled. "Sure. What's wrong?"

Will opened his mouth but the words stuck in his throat. His eyes flickered briefly to Jason, Piper, and Annabeth who stood a little bit behind the son of Poseidon, waiting.

Percy took the hint, much to Will's relief. "Hey guys, can you give us a minute? We'll catch up."

Jason nodded, although he looked slightly concerned. "Of course. Just remember -"

"I know, I know. We're on a time crunch," Percy said. "We'll be quick. Right Will?"

Will nodded. As the others left, Percy turned back to Will with a puzzled frown on his face. "Hey man, what's this about?"

"You've..." Will hesitated, trying to think of the best way to broach such a delicate subject. "You've been to Tartarus too right? Like Nico?"

Whatever Percy had been expecting, it wasn't that. Will felt he might as well have slapped him in the face. Where he had first looked curious, Percy now looked withdrawn and guarded. "Yeah," he said cautiously. "I have."

Will suddenly felt guilty. Like Nico, Percy had literally been through hell and here was Will, questioning him tactlessly about what had to be, at best, painful memories. The only thing that made him decide to continue his line of questioning was the fact that he felt he didn't really have a choice anymore. "Right. And uh... how are you? After it, I mean?"

Percy looked decidedly uncomfortable and not at all happy about the turn of this conversation. "Okay, I guess. I mean, I'm alive aren't I?"

"Alright." Will nodded to himself. Percy continued to stare at him questioningly. "And, uh, any nightmares?"

"Are you asking me as a doctor?" Percy asked suspiciously.

Will leapt at the opportunity. "Yes! Definitely. As your doctor, I just... want to make sure you're doing okay."
"Oh, well yeah, I've had some nightmares. Annabeth too." Percy reached up and scratched nervously at the back of his neck. "It was really bad the first few nights after the battle- well, actually the first night I was so exhausted I just passed out and then they gradually started getting worse from there- but they've also eased up a little recently. Like I said, I'll pull through."

Will nodded. "I suppose that's good. And in these dreams... have you felt any physical sensation?"

Percy shot him a strange look. "What do you mean?"

"Like..." Will waved his arms. "Do you ever... feel physical pain? In it or after you wake up?"

"Um, no." Percy's frown deepened. "They're just dreams. What makes you ask that?"

"No reason," Will said quickly. "And uh... does he ever talk to you?"

Percy shot him another look.

"Does Tartarus talk to you?" Will elaborated. "Try to get you to do stuff? Make deals with him? Threaten you if you don't grant his wishes?"

Apparently subtlety wasn't his strong suit because Percy was starting to look very suspicious. "Why are you asking me all this?" He took a step closer to Will and lowered his voice. "What aren't you telling me?"

"What? Oh nothing, I was just curious," Will said, backpedaling immediately. "It'll be good to add to my report, you know? I'm always telling my sibling, you can never be too detailed. In fact a good rule of thumb is that a patient write-up should be approximately the length of a minor novel... But I'm rambling. Which I do all the time, not just when I'm worried. 'Cause I'm not. Worried, I mean. Even though I'm rambling." Will flushed. "Anyways, I should be going-"

"Hey, wait." Percy stepped sideways, blocking Will's path. "You can't just blow me off after that. Something's clearly bothering you."

Standing there and feeling undeservedly cornered, Will randomly found himself trying to conclude just what exactly it had been about Percy that had Nico so taken when they first met. In addition, Will may or may not have been privy to know that Annabeth was not the only girl to have a major crush on Percy, and that could also create a certain type of appeal. Will himself had never shared much in their attraction and, actually now that he thought about it, frankly he couldn't see why Nico did either. Unless Nico was into the brave, heroic types... With his messy, ocean-blown dark hair and green eyes, the son of Poseidon was sort of very good looking in a sort of obvious way... you know, if Will squinted. But all that aside, compared to Nico- with his jet-black hair, mischievous eyes, and smart-mouthed remarks- Will couldn't help but feel that Percy was downright mundane in comparison.

Nope, Will really couldn't see just what made Percy seem so great in Nico's eyes. Not when there were other people who were just as worthy of his attentions... Heck, there was probably all kinds of stuff Will could do that Percy couldn't. Like, deliver a centaur baby... or sing gods-awful opera, or be terrorized by pillows.

Oh my Gods, Will thought with a slow sinking feeling. I have no chance with do I?

But wait, when did this become about him?

Percy was still frowning at him, though now he looked a little worried. "Why are you squinting at me like that?" Oblivious to Will's hormonal inner musings, Percy's eyes narrowed. If it were
possible, he looked even more suspicious now. "Does this have something to do with Nico?"

Will's eyes widened. "What? No!"

"Tell me the truth," Percy said. "If Tartarus is strong enough to be able to communicate with people outside his prison, I need to know. Surely I don't need to tell you how bad that is."

"I know..." Will muttered.

"Tell me what happened," Percy repeated.

Feeling like an utter traitor to his friend but not knowing what else to do, Will told Percy about the mark that had appeared upon Nico's shoulder and of his promise to Tartarus. With every word the sense of guilt grew. He couldn't help but feel like he was betraying Nico's trust by confiding in Percy, but frankly Will didn't know what else to do. They were out of time to figure out a different plan.

"Nico made a deal with him?" Percy exclaimed violently when Will finished. Will shushed him and looked around to make sure no one was listening to them. He didn't need rumors flying around camp that Nico di Angelo had made an evil pact with Tartarus or some other such nonsense. Even if it was sort of accurate. "Is he insane?"

"I got the impression Tartarus didn't give him much of a choice but to agree," Will said defensively.

Percy shook his head. "This is important. What was the favor Tartarus wanted?"

"Nico didn't know," Will told him. "Tartarus wouldn't tell him. He just made Nico promise that he owed him one."

Percy stared at him for a moment, clearly thinking hard. "Hm."

Will frowned at Percy. "What is it?"

Percy sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to dis Nico or anything, but he isn't exactly the most truthful person I know of."

A small flutter of rage shot through Will's gut. "Nico's not a liar!" he exclaimed loudly. He looked around sheepishly but it didn't appear anyone had heard him. He forced himself to lower his voice.

"That's not really what I meant" Percy amended. "Here, let me rephrase it; he's not the most forthcoming with what you could call arguably vital information. You may have noticed but sometimes he keeps stuff to himself. Dangerous stuff."

"What's your point?" Will demanded, feeling annoyed. How dare anyone accuse Nico of being anything less than perfect?

Percy hesitated before appearing to come to a decision. "My point is; how can you be sure he doesn't already know what the favor is and just didn't tell you?"

Will gaped at Percy, feeling more than a little betrayed by the notion. "He- he wouldn't lie to me!"

Percy watched him for a few seconds before dropping his gaze. "Okay. I just really hope you're right."

It took Will a moment to understand just why he felt so hurt, angry, and defensive at the accusation.
It was because as much as Will loathed to admit it, there was some truth to Percy's words. Nico did keep stuff to himself, stuff that could potentially hurt himself. The difference this time was that it wasn't just himself he could end up hurting. But this was all ridiculous anyways. There wasn't any reason for Nico to have lied to Will. Besides, did Will really think Nico would choose to keep something this deadly to himself? Unfortunately he felt he knew the answer to that question, and he didn't like it.

"Yeah, me too," Will said in a small voice as he watched Percy walk away.

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Nico

He didn't pause until he reached the peak of the dune. Ahead of him the rolling golden hillsides glimmered under the pallid sun of Elysium. Long yellow stems of wheat grass swayed lazily in the breeze, the picture of innocent tranquility. As if they weren't about to be charred back into the soil, brittle and blackened. Nico reached out a hand, skimming the dry blooms with the palm of his hand. He was as far as could be from being a plant person, and certainly no child of Demeter, but these fields were part of his home. These great, shimmering fields, the rippling clear waters of the lake, and the snow capped mountains in the North. Even the soil beneath his feet. That soil was the very same earth he had clung to with all his strength, months ago, when he first felt the tug of Tartarus. He had been dragged into the core of the world, watched as the ground disappeared from view as he fell. A cold hand closed around Nico's heart.

Tartarus might be able to have him but he had no claim to the lands of the Underworld.

At the docks of the lake he found Rhadamanthus.

Rhadamanthus was speaking with quiet urgency to one a spirit, a woman whose hair was styled in an elaborate updo and clothing that suggested she'd died in the early 19th century. She carried a clipboard, and had a feather pen tucked behind a bejeweled ear. After she departed Rhadamanthus turned toward Nico. For a ghost himself, the guardian of Elysium looked tired. His eyes were still that unnerving shade of molten gold but they held a weariness to them Nico hadn't seen there before. He remained silent as Nico approached him, just watching with solemn sort of sadness.

"Any success?" Nico asked, already knowing what the answer would be.

Rhadamanthus sighed and shook his head. "I am afraid not. A-Agnete, this... traitor you search for, she is not here. Not in the Isle of the Blessed, at least. I would know if she were."

Nico was momentarily gladdened to have a fellow friend, one who was not a God, one who was not bound by duty alone to protect this place. No, much like Nico, Rhadamanthus had chosen Elysium as his home, protected it with his life, or rather (since he was already dead) - his soul.

Nico winced although he'd been expected nothing less. "Agnete is devious and manipulative. She is more adept at controlling the mist than anyone I've ever met. I was hoping I could go into the city and make certain she has not slipped by," he informed Rhadamanthus. "My father has asked me to find the traitors Asbolus mentioned."

Rhadamanthus nodded. "Of course, I understand." He turned away from Nico in favor of gazing out over the lake. Nico could just make out the steeple of the city through the shroud of mist. "You truly believe she may have slipped in there?"
Nico nodded. "I know she plans to raise Tartarus in Elysium and she is running out of time. She has to be here."

"Elysium is huge," Rhadamanthus reminded him. "What makes you believe she is here?"

Nico stared at the city, imagining all the nooks and ally ways he would have to search. "It is busy. Agnete will want to slip by unseen. And it is by Erebus. If she does manage to raise Tartarus he will have easy access to the palace." Of this he was certain. If he was Agnete it was exactly where he would go. "How're preparations?" he asked Rhadamanthus suddenly.

Rhadamanthus shrugged. "The ghost are not happy. They do not want to leave. Right now the plan is to get as many as possible back across to purgatory." A smirk suddenly twisted across Rhadamanthus's face. "I heard Hades made Charon trade in his canoe for a cruise ship to fit more people."

Nico snorted. That was something he would pay to see.

Rhadamanthus sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. "I feel bad for them all," he admitted. "Forced to stay, forced to leave. An eternity of enduring. That is no choice. That is no way to live."

Taking his leave, Nico climbed into the small boat at the end of the dock and pushed off for the Isle of the Blessed. At the other side he clambered out, taking note of a message engraved into the rockwork of the city; τυχερός νησί. The Fortunate Isle.

An ironic name, given the situation. Upon entering the front gate of the city a massive stretch of stairs led upwards into the main section. Nico let out an annoyed breath. Why did all ancient cities seem to have a crap-ton of stairs to climb before you reached anything interesting? Part of him wished he could simply shadow travel up there but he knew he was pushing his limits after being injured and having so little sleep the past few days.

When he reached the top, Nico's legs were on fire and he was forced to pause for breath. In the center of the cobbled street a large, circular fountain bubbled quietly. Nico gazed at it sullenly as he caught his breath. The centerpiece of the fountain was adorned with three little cherubs that spat streams of water from their rocky pursed lips. Nico stared at them blankly. He'd never liked babies, fat babies, or fat incontinent babies. So why did he suddenly feel so damned sad?

A glimmer in the water stream caught his eye and drew his attention away from the dark storm of thoughts drifting through his head. Frowning, he stepped closer to look. His eyes widened when he realized what it was.

"Dechóasmine to mínymá sas," Nico said, striding forward eagerly. Sure enough, an iris message unfolded before him and Nico found himself looking into the tired yet hopeful faces of Will and Percy.

"Nico!" Will exclaimed, relief evident on his face. "You're alive!"

"Of course I am," Nico said, frowning. "What's going on?"

"We have a plan," Will began, before launching into an explanation of how both of the camps alike were preparing to march into the Underworld. As he spoke Nico found himself watching the son of Apollo closely, noting the dark circles under his eyes, and the way his voice cracked- whether from emotion or exhaustion or both. Nico wanted to ask him if he'd slept at all since they got back, even though he already knew what Will's answer would be. First and foremost Will was a doctor and...
Nico knew he would never take time for himself if he thought he could be helping others. "-they're just waiting for Jason's signal at this point. We need you to talk to Hades and convince him to let the camps enter the Underworld."

Nico shook his head, wishing he had something else to say rather than dash Will's hopes. "It won't work, Will. I already tried talking to my father about that very same idea- he thinks bringing more people into the Underworld will only add to the chaos and leave the borders vulnerable to subterfuge."

"But we can help!" Will blurted out. "With all three armies combined."

"I think my father's right," Nico interrupted Will before the son of Apollo could leap in full throttle and kindle a new argument. "He's ordered me to hunt down our traitors from the inside-"

"Hold on." For the first time since the iris message had appeared Percy spoke up. Nico eyed him somewhat anxiously. Percy didn't seem mad at him, despite the fact that Nico had lost his temple and screamed rude insults at his face. It had felt good at the time but now Nico felt thoroughly ashamed. Unfortunately, apologizing immediately and without grudge wasn't one of his virtues. He needed a little more time to cool off. "Did you just say traitors? As in more than one?"

Nico nodded. "Three, apparently. I have to hunt them down before it's too late."

"Agnete is one," Percy said slowly, counting her on his finger. "Who are the other two?"

"I'm not sure," Nico admitted, and wondering how on earth he was supposed to find someone when he had no idea who he was looking for. Percy nodded slowly in response but Nico was aware of him watching him closely. Why that was, Nico wasn't sure.

"Well, we can help," Will said immediately. "I'll come to the Underworld and help you search."

"No!" Nico exclaimed loudly. Will paused, mouth still open, looking like someone had just shot his favorite prized cow. Nico immediately felt guilty but he needed Will to say put. "The Underworld is a mess right now. I have enough to keep track of without having to worry about your safety."

Will scowled. "I can take care of myself, di Angelo!"

"I know," Nico said impatiently. "That's why you-"

"-can help!" Will finished determinedly.

"Yes," Nico enunciated carefully. "From camp. In the infirmary."

"I'm not sitting around doing nothing!"

"Yes, you will," Nico snapped. "If you actually want to be helpful you'll do a I say and stay out of my way! Look, I know my father's kingdom better than anyone and I work better alone."

"Yeah right," Will yelled. "Gods, why can't you ever just accept help when you need it?"

Nico opened his mouth but couldn't find words immediately, shocked as he was by the outburst. Will rarely lost his temper and when he did Nico was starting to realize it usually meant he had crossed a line. "Will... Are you okay?" he asked quietly. He was more than aware that Percy was still there, listening to every word.
"Fine, Nico," Will muttered, looking unbearably miserable all of a sudden. "I'm just fine."

Nico's heart ached. He couldn't stand this. He wished the Iris message was a portal and that he could step straight through and into Will's arms. If he thought he had the energy left to shadow travel straight back to Camp he might have done so.

"Will..." he whispered, wishing suddenly that Percy wasn't there. He didn't know what he wanted to say to the son of Apollo, just that he was willing to do anything to wipe that look off his face.

"It's alright Nico," Will said quietly. "I get it. I'll stay here. Just... be careful okay?"

Nico didn't know how to respond. Here they were at the end of times and no words seemed to be enough. He opened his mouth to respond only to find he had waited too long. Will had already swiped his hand through the mist, leaving Nico staring at nothing but the steady stream of water and feeling incredibly alone in the giant city.

Will

"You okay, Will?" Percy asked once the Iris message closed.

"Fine," Will muttered, doing his best to have a staring contest with the ground and swallow the rock-sized lump in his throat. Stupid, stupid, he thought. Stupid Agnete for starting all this, stupid Underworld for getting destroyed, and most of all, stupid Nico for thinking he could save the world alone.

Percy tried again. "Look, I wouldn't take it to heart. Nico's always been super independent. If he says his best chance at stopping Agnete is by himself, then maybe we should trust his judgment. He's a pretty smart kid, believe it or not. He does actually know what he's doing."

Will gaped at Percy, disbelieving. "Is that seriously what you believe? That Nico can do this all on his own? Just because he said so? Is that also what you thought, all those years ago?"

"What?" Percy blinked at Will, clearly startled. "What are you talking about?"

"I know Bianca asked you to look after him," Will said, voice shaky. "And you promised you would. Nico told me."

"Yeah," Percy said slowly. "And?"

"And you didn't!" Will shouted, eyes prickling. "You let him run off with no idea who was and no idea where to go!" He knew he was being horribly unfair to Percy. After all Percy had only been, what, thirteen himself at the time? How was he supposed to have looked after the world's angriest ten-year-old when he was barely more than a kid himself? "Sure, he can swing a sword and survive on the streets for years but haven't you realized by now that he has no idea what he's doing!"

"I tried-" Percy said, clearly taken aback by Will's outburst. "I tried to go after him. I did my best. But when I got to him he didn't want help."

"He never wants help!" Will yelled, exasperated.

Percy looked pale. And deeply annoyed. "What's your point, Will?"
"My point is..." Will waved his hands helplessly. "I don't get why you couldn't have tried harder!"

He marched off without waiting for a response. Forget what Nico said. He would NOT sit around and do nothing.

Will tried to remain awake, tried to keep putting together more medical supplies. He had the distinct notion they would be needing them soon, too soon. At one point Kayla came and touched his wrist, telling him he should go to bed, to which he forced his mouth into a sort of pained smile and nodded. He didn't go to bed. Around 10 pm his eyes felt full of sand and his head drooped, the dramatics of the day having finally decided to creep up on him.

Re-corking a solution of unicorn drought and finely ground harpy talons, he stood up and made to leave the infirmary. He nearly dropped the vial in surprise by what he saw.

A woman stood immobile in the doorway, watching Will with eyes as silver and ancient as the moon. Her russet hair was woven tightly into braids and she wore a deep green tunic, bound tight to her bodice with thick leather straps. An elegantly crafted longbow was slung over her shoulders, a hunting knife resting at her waist.

"Lady Artemis," Will said in surprise. She appeared older than she had on the island of the Lotus Eaters, but her eyes gave her away and her face was just as solemn as he remembered. Now however, she looked ready for battle.

Will felt he should kneel, or bow, or something, but as he moved to do so the goddess stepped forward and touched his shoulder. "That is not necessary, I think," she said quietly. Her silver eyes glinted as she searched Will's face. Will was reminded briefly of starlight. "Because of you I have been reunited with my brother."

A feeling of warmth briefly flooded him from where her palm rested on his shoulder and Will sensed the unspoken thank you beneath her words. Finding his voice Will asked, "Is Apollo alright? Has Zeus...?" He wasn't sure what he wanted to ask but Artemis seemed to read his expression.

Artemis's brows knit together in concern. "Our father was most upset when Apollo confronted him. I-" She broke off with a soft shudder. "Not a moment after my brother was freed and I thought Zeus was going to tear him apart where he stood." She must have caught the look on Will's face because her expression cleared somewhat. "You needn't worry, Will. I am not privy to the details but they must have come to some manner of agreement because Apollo returned to Olympus an hour ago. Zeus insisted that he needed to be there to help, ah, prepare. As for whether his punishment will continue, Zeus has not said. He has... other things on his mind."

Will's heart leapt in his chest. "Does he still plan to cut off the Underworld? Let Tartarus have it?"

Artemis finally removed her hand from his shoulder, expression guarded. "I know it is difficult to understand but at times certain sacrifices are necessary. I will be the first to admit I do not always agree with my father's actions even if I understand his reasoning."

"That's easy for someone to say when it's not them doing the sacrificing," Will said, feeling daring. He may have been sleep deprived and miserable but he still had sense enough to know offending a goddess was a bad idea.

"The situation is difficult. Recent alliances aside, there is bad blood between Hades and Zeus."
Between all the Gods in fact. And we are prideful. We are used to being in control, making our own decisions. Even now, with all that we have built at risk of collapse, my family sits in their thrones and argues. Sometimes I fear that our pride will be our undoing," Artemis admitted. She frowned at Will for a moment, scanning his face with her luminous eyes. Will didn't know what she was hoping to see there, besides fear and worry. "I thought my messages had been clear, but... Well, I can see now that you still do not comprehend."

"I comprehend Zeus perfectly," Will muttered, trying not feel insulted. Why did everyone seem to imply he was a dimwit? Perhaps that was one of the reason Will liked Nico so much; Nico had the politeness to proclaim Will an idiot straight to his face. Loudly. And often. "I just don't understand how he can stand by and watch the Underworld be destroyed."

"You mistake my meaning," Artemis interjected. "Please close your eyes."

Will stared at her, unsure what she intended. But as she raised her hand, fingers extended to touch Will's forehead, he suddenly realized what she was trying to do. The moment she touched him he found himself far away, both in distance and time.

He stood in the middle of a wide marble walkway, not unlike a patio. On all sides thick pillars extended skyward, swathed in thick vines of ivy and other varieties of climbing flowers. The pillars must have been purely for aesthetic purposes because there was no ceiling to be held up. For a few seconds Will gazed upwards breathlessly, struck by the sheer vastness of the sky and the thousands of twinkling stars that shimmered like blanket. He realized he must be in some sort of ancient atrium or garden-terrace. Tropical plants of various species, colors, dexterity, and aromas filled the room. Farther down the pathway a fountain trickled lazily, foamy bubbles rising and popping on the crystal surface.

None of that held Will's attention for long because he was not alone in the room. Two other boys were with him.

One appeared to be older possibly around 18 years of age, if that. Under the fall of his dark, curling bangs Will could just make out the faint gleam of a thin circlet that encompassed his head. His eyes were a light brown and brimming with a startling amount of malice for someone so young. Beside him walked another boy, younger, probably around Nico's age. Like the older boy he had dark, curly hair and brown eyes. Though his eyes were not as deadly as the other's, Will noted that something else smoldered just beneath the surface. Rage. The rest of his face was impassive, a carefully constructed mask for his anger. It was then he realized something else; the boys were clearly related. While there were differences, the younger being tanner, leaner rather than more muscular, the similarities in their features could not be denied. They both shared the same sloped nose, the same resolute set in their jaw, and the rigid posture of someone raised with the expectation of nobility.

The younger boy looked vaguely familiar to Will. He had seem him before, he realized, in the very first dream he'd had of Agnete. He was the same boy who had stood beside her in the field, though he had been a child then. But that wasn't it. There was somewhere else Will had seen him.

"The plans are set then?" the older brother was asking lazily. He reached out to pluck a pale yellow flower from a vine. "No difficulties?"

"No, my Lord. I will have them all ready to depart at first light." The younger boy spoke quietly, casting a dark eye at his brother. For a couple of second he eyed the older ones face, apparently searching for something. He looked away quickly, a decidedly grim expression settling over his face.
"Excellent." The older boy- Will assumed he was a king or ruler of some sort, though he still wasn't sure exactly where they were- twirled the flower between his fingers, watching it spin. "How is your friend doing? What is her name again? The pretty blonde one."

The younger one shrugged his shoulders. "Agnete is fine. The city seems to delight her, although her studies have kept her quite busy as of late so I have not seen her as much as I would like."

"So you say. And yet my sources tell me your never at the palace. And I find it hard to believe you spend your nights wandering the dark streets in solitude."

The younger boy flushed deeply as he glared sharply at his brother, annoyance written plain across his face. "You've been having me followed?" Will might have thought a faint touch of alarm trickled into his voice.

His brother laughed. "Of course not. Though I would be a fool to not have noticed. If you disappear over the summer months should I act surprised as well?"

"You need not worry," the younger one said, almost bitterly. He hesitated before adding, "I daresay both of us will soon be spending a lot more time here."

"Just because you are frightened of her powers does not mean I will be so easily cowed," he retorted. "I do not ask for your support but as your brother I do command respect."

He looked ready to continue but the older one's face suddenly quieted, the hostility and repugnance replaced by a veil of calm. "My apologies. You are correct of course. I spoke out of turn." He took a deep breath, finally releasing his grip on the flower. It fluttered down to the stonework like a miniature pinwheel. He stared at it for a few seconds. Twice he opened his mouth like he wished to say something else but then closed it. Eventually he seemed to reach a conclusion to his inner dilemma. "Perhaps it would be best if Agnete and I were to... start afresh. You say she is impressed by the city?"

The older one froze in the midst of twirling his flower. A second later he spun around, fury flashing across his face. "Are you mad?" he spat, lip curling. "I know love can turn even the brightest of us into fools, yet I thought you had more sense than that? Surely you must realize how stupid marrying her would be!" Will blinked, mouth half open in surprise at the sudden one-eighty in his temperament. On the other hand the younger boy must have been used to his brother's outburst because he didn't flinch or look remotely surprised, though his hand clenched ever so slightly.

"You think I don't know what happens to them?" he screamed, struggling. "All the ones you send in..."

"You think I don't know what happens to them?" he screamed, struggling. "All the ones you send in..."
there? I swear if you even think about touching her, I'll-!” He continued screaming even as guards rushed into the courtyard and tore him free of the King. "You're a monster Minos! I will never forgive you!"

Will's blood ran cold.

As the boy was hauled out, still screaming, spitting, and struggling like a man possessed, he knew in an instant why he had looked so familiar even though Will hadn't recognized him at first. The last time he had seen that boy he had been a little older, his hair shorter, the brown eyes replaced by an unearthly shade of gold. His bronzed skin, in this vision tanned from days under the hot sun of Crete, had been pale, ghostly, most of the color washed out from hundreds of years spent in the Underworld.

"Oh my Gods," Will breathed.

He lurched awake and heard a soft *thud!* by his feet. He was still sitting in his chair but he had apparently fallen forward, his face pressed into the pillow on the infirmary bed. The unicorn-harpie concoction had spilled across the sheets, staining them a luminescent pink. He sat there for a moment dazed and trying collect his thoughts when he suddenly realized he was not alone.

"Percy!" Will jumped violently, a movement that caused Percy to jump in turn. "Don't do that! I could have killed you!"

Percy frowned. "With a pillow?"

Will stared from him to the pillow which he had clenched on impulse upon being startled, mouth working in soundless disbelief. "You know what? Yes! With a friggin' pillow, Jackson! Don't even try to argue otherwise!"


Will breathed out a sigh. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. Pillows are... deeply triggering to me."

"Okay." Percy nodded slowly. "Kinda weird. But I won't judge." He motioned with his chin to something by Will's feet. "What' that?"

Will peered down and saw a tiny, unfamiliar satchel laying upon the wooden floor boards. He picked it up cautiously, and saw that a small note was attached;

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My thanks, to be used when in greatest need.
Cast the contents upon the winds and I shall answer.
We stand behind you.
```

-A

Frowning, Will carefully opened the satchel and saw that some sort of silver powder-like substance shifted a sudden snap of clarity Will remembered what he had been dreaming- had it been a dream? - about. "I think- I think Nico might be in trouble," he gasped to Percy. His heart lurched at the words. What if he was too late?

Percy nodded his head. "I think so too."

Will froze. "You do?" He couldn't see Percy's face all that clearly in the low lighting of the infirmary but the son of Poseidon looked perfectly solemn.
"You were right before, Will. I should've done more."

"Oh." Will blinked, frowning. It took him a few seconds to figure out what Percy was talking about. "Oh. About earlier, I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to--"

"It's fine," Percy interrupted. He shifted uncomfortably and it was then that Will noticed he had his backpack slung over one shoulder. "Honestly, don't worry about it. It got me thinking and, like I said, you're right. I've made a decision. I've already spoken with Annabeth and she understands. I just want to know if you're coming with me."

Will gazed up at him, trying to clear the thoughts that swarmed through his head. "Coming with you... where?"

"I'm doing what I should have done years ago," Percy said quietly. "I'm going after Nico. I'm going to the Underworld."

Chapter End Notes

Well that was definitely more depressing than I expected. I feel sort of bad for picking on Percy so much but I feel it is necessary, as he, Will, and Nico have some unfinished business with each other. Ugh, I'm sort of frustrated because a lot more was supposed to happen this chapter but when I hit the 10,000 word mark I though uh uh, no way, I have to stop. Anyways, thank you for reading!

End Notes

To Be Continued...

Thank you so much if you took the time to read this! Okay, so I know hydra's aren't technically considered poisonous (I think, I'm not an expert on Greek monsters) but I wanted to use one. Thank you for reading, and please leave a review after the beep!

...*beep* :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!