Courting Death

by MsMay

Summary

It’s the first thing they tell you when you’re claimed by Apollo. It should have sounded silly to you.

“Love at first sight?”

But the weird thing was, it didn’t. It resonated somewhere deep inside of you, like a little gear clicked in your head, setting everything into place.

In which, Will Solace accidentally does not listen to that warning at all.

Notes

Be warned, there's a bit of swearing
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Your name is Will Solace. Today is June, 13th. It is the first time in your life that you have ever left California. New York is strange and Camp Half blood stranger still. You don’t know what's waiting for you, but you do know one thing. You are a son of Apollo. What that means, you are about to find out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s the first thing they tell you when you’re claimed by Apollo. It should have sounded silly to you.

“Love at first sight?”

But the weird thing was, it didn’t. It resonated somewhere deep inside of you, like a little gear clicked in your head, setting everything into place. A tall kid named Lee fletcher is the one explaining it all too you, but a couple of the Apollo cabin kids are staring at you too. Some of the ones that look older are minding their own business. You guess they’ve heard this speech plenty of times before.

“Not exactly,” Lee continues. You’d think he would look uncomfortable about this kind of thing, but he doesn’t. Instead he looks pained, like he’s given you one of those ‘prophecies of doom’ you’ve heard so much about. “I think that Love at first sight is a bit . . .” He trails off, looking for the right words.

“Romantic?” some other kid offers. He’s tiny in comparison to Lee, but something tells you that you’d never want to cross him.

“Yeah, thanks Michael.” Michael just nods, and goes back to what he was doing before. You can see that he was organizing music folders. You wonder blankly if he has a gift for music, like some of the other kids you’ve heard. You wonder if you’ll get a gift for music too.

“It’s different then love, but it definitely can become love in some cases, but most of the time . . .” He trails off, that pained look flickering across his face again.

“I don’t get it,” you say “What does this have to do with Apollo? Shouldn't it be something the uh, the Aphrodite kids have to worry about?” At that Michael scoffs a kind of bitter laugh. Lee just sighs, like he’s tired.

“Funny you should mention the love goddess . . . Have you ever heard of Cupid, kid?” You shake your head, not because you’ve never heard of him (obviously you’ve heard of him) but because you don’t know what a tiny plump cherub has to do with this situation and you have the feeling he'll explain it either way.

“Well, he’s the god of love but . . . more the passions of love. He’s known to have a darker side. Once our father Apollo scorned him, and made fun of the love god’s archery skills. He told him that firing arrows of love was useless.
“Cupid took his revenge quickly enough. It’s the story of the laurel tree. He shot Apollo with an arrow of maddening love and desire, and he shot Laurel, a tree nymph, with an arrow of disgust. She fled, and Apollo chased her relentlessly, consumed by his obsession. Eventually, when she was about to collapse from exhaustion, her father took pity and turned her into the laurel tree. Even then Apollo wouldn’t leave her alone. He claimed the Laurel as his sacred tree, glorifying it as a sign of victory.”

Something twisted deep in your gut. You understand now, why some kids in Cabin 11 preferred to go unclaimed. Shame burns up the back of your neck.

“It’s a curse that lingers with Apollo. In a lot of his myths he falls prey to that same obsession. Cupid does not forget easily.” Now you understand why Michael said that ‘love at first sight’ was too romantic. “And, it’s a curse that lingers with his children too. We can become fixated on people who are little more than strangers, and become possessive and jealous when they hardly know our name.” You don’t have to ask to know that there’s some terrible camp story to go with this warning. It takes all your focus to nod. There must be something about the pallor of your face that makes him pause and sigh. “Look, that’s not to say that you’re going to turn into some creepy psycho stalker or anything. It can turn into love, and with a lot of Apollo kids it does. That’s why we warn all the new comers, so they can recognize if it happens to them. And it doesn’t happen to all of us or anything, only sometimes, but . . .” He didn’t need to finish the sentence. You understood.

However, you were also eight years old and that whole day, being claimed by Apollo, it all seemed so surreal. Things as great and terrible as Cupid’s curse seemed intangible to you.

. . .

About two years later your camp begins to fall apart. War is brewing between the gods. All you really know is that it has something to do with a thief.

“Hey, don’t look at me!” Cecil protests. He was claimed by the thief god yesterday and really it was no surprise.

“I’m only good at stealing small things.” He holds a pen out in his hand as if the theft is somehow justified because it is just some cheap ballpoint pen.

“Yeah. You’d have to be pretty darned good to steal from the gods.” Lou Ellen rests her cheek in her hand. None of you really have anything to say to that. You’re all sitting in front of the Hermes cabin on the steps like you used to back before you were claimed.

“Did you hear that a new camper came in last night?” Cecil pipes up. You hadn’t.

“His spot on the floor is right next to me,” Lou says. “All he had with him was a minotaur horn. Maybe he’s the child of that big prophecy people keep whispering about!”

“Yeah, and maybe you’ll be claimed by Aphrodite,” you joke. Lou pushes you so hard you tumble off the steps.

“Hey, where’d that pen go?” Cecil mutters. He’s patting his pockets and looking around.

“Who cares, it’s just a stupid pen,” Lou gripes as Cecil pushes her over to see if maybe she’s sitting on it.

“Yeah, but I stole it from Chiron. That’s a pretty big accomplishment if I do say so myself.” He pouts, giving up on the lost pen. You shrug.
“Someone will find it eventually,” you say, though that doesn’t seem to reassure Cecil. You remember thinking that one little pen can’t matter that much.

. . .

It turns out one little pen can matter a lot, especially when it’s wielded by a child of prophecy. That new camper brings back the lightning bolt. Turns out a child of Hermes did steal it. All you could think when you heard the new was ‘thank the gods it wasn’t Cecil’. You don’t know what you’d do without that kleptomaniac.

You come very close to finding out. Everything is fine until the tree is poisoned. That’s when you first realize home is starting to fall apart. You had come for visit during spring break, and never left. How could you? Monsters were beginning to press the magic barrier and kids were leaving left and right to try and find cures. At first, you weren’t sure how you could be of much use. Four years at camp and you can’t say you’re good at much. You’re a good archer, but you’re not the best. That’s Michael. You’re a pretty good leader, but you’re not the best. That’s Lee, obviously. You’re pretty decent at sword work, but Cecil is better.

The monsters don’t seem to recognize this distinction. When they first make it past the border, it’s a disaster. No one had seen it coming. Sure, they prodded and pressed against the barrier, but they had never made it through. You, Cecil, and Lou Ellen are on guard duty. The empousai is so fast; you don’t know how Cecil held out for as long as he did. When she finally gets the drop on him, it’s with her teeth. When it happens you stand there dumb struck for a second, and all you can think of is a passage you once read. Hecate sends empousai to block off roads and devour travelers. In some twisted way, it makes sense that she would go for Cecil first, son of the travel god, even though you’re obviously the weaker fighter.

Then everything snaps into focus, and you’re furious. She lets go of Cecil just as fast as she had grabbed him. He’s bleeding profusely from the juncture between neck and shoulder. Still, he tries to fight. She rakes his side with her claws. You lash out at her, trying your best to make a distraction. Cecil crumples to the ground. Your mind fills with one thought: No, you can’t die, you can’t die. It becomes a tattered litany in your head as the empousai wears you down. Then suddenly, Lou Ellen is at your side. There’s something different about her, you think. You can’t quite place it. Whatever it is, it seems to make the empousai nervous. The monster almost seems reluctant to hit Lou.

“Take care of Cecil,” she says.

“What, but I-”

“Will.” Something flickers behind her eyes, almost like understanding. “I can handle her.” Lou is an even worse swordsman than you, but right now you’re not going to argue with her.

In a second you’re on your knees next to Cecil. There were few times in your life when you felt more helpless. What can you do, what are you supposed to do, you don’t know- You slap yourself out of that panic. You are the son of Apollo. You can’t do much, but gods be damned if there really is a single drop of divine blood in your veins you will use what gifts you were given. You don’t have much, but you will make it work. That litany of ‘you can’t die’ turns into ‘I won’t let you die’. Soon enough, that turns into a hymn. You aren’t the best singer in Apollo. That’s Kyla. But it works. You pour your heart and soul into that hymn, everything you have as your hands work frantically, tearing away your clothes to make bandages so you can staunch the bleeding. There’s a cry on the hill behind you, and a wind carries the smell of sulfur and a bit of dust towards you. Cecil opens his eyes.

“Will?” he mumbles.
“Shut up, you’re too weak to talk,” you tell him. Then his eyes grow wide as dinner plates.

“Lou. . .” he says. You turn around. Above Lou’s head there’s a burning torch. She looks at her hands, then up above her head. Tears well in her eyes.

“Five years.” She says. She sprints over to you and Cecil and falls to her knees. You throw your arm around her shoulder, and Cecil weakly reaches up to take her hand. Then she begins sobbing in earnest.

That is the day you learn that nothing is given. You must earn everything. You spent so much of your time wondering why you weren’t given gifts like your brothers and sisters in Apollo, why they were so much better at things than you were. Suddenly you feel like a fool.

“You’ll do Hecate proud,” you say, and she nods, a bright smile on her face under the tears.

Quietly, you promise to do Apollo proud too. You’ll get better. You’ll work harder. Healing, you decide. You’ll be a better healer than anyone can imagine.

. . .

In the years to come that promise does you well. The time you don’t spend with your nose in a medical text, learning healing from Chiron or the nature spirits, or practicing on kids in the infirmary, you spend with your friends. Mostly you hang out in the Hermes cabin with Cecil and Lou, but it’s surprising you how much being a doctor has widened your social circle. The Apollo kids are social by nature, but it never really hits you how social you are until one day Lou comments on it.

“Wow you just know everyone,” she says, rolling her eyes as you wave to yet another person.

“That was just Katie Gardner,” you say dismissively.

“And how do you know Katie?”

“She stopped by the infirmary for some burn treatments after the Stoll brothers set the Demeter cabin on fire.” She stares at you for a moment, and then shakes her head. “What?” you ask.

“I swear, you could make friends with a rock,” she sighs.

“Or something even more stubborn and unfriendly, like a hunter of Artemis,” Cecil snickers. Where he had come from you don’t know. At this point you’ve kind of stopped asking.

“Don’t be mean,” Lou admonishes.

“I’m not being mean Lulu.” Lou’s fingers twitch towards her sword at the mention of her pet name. That starts them bickering and you zone out for a few moments. Over near the dining pavilion, you spot one of the new campers. He’s sitting by the hearth, and if you didn’t know better you’d say he was talking to it.

“That’s Nico,” Cecil chimes in. You start, looking over at the other two. They’re staring at you now. You don’t know why. Lou has one of those looks in her eyes that reminds you she’s lived nearly six years in the Hermes cabin.

“Really?” You say for the sake of being polite. You don’t really care.

“Really?” Now you’re a bit more interested. According to one of the children of Rumor, Percy and Thalia had gone up to get some pretty powerful demigods. You look back at Nico. He’s smiling brightly, like the fire is an old friend.

“You, he’s ten,” Lou says. That’s only two years younger than you. “That’s only two years younger than us.”

You hum an acknowledgement of her statement, because the fact that she practically guessed your thoughts is only slightly less freaky than the fact that Cecil didn’t bring up that he’s actually three years older than Nico. Cecil is always such a butt about the fact that he’s three months older than Lou, and five months older than you. You’re no child of Athena, but even you can figure out that they’re both looking for a reaction. You squint at them, eyebrows scrunching up in concentration. Finally you give up. You can’t figure out their motivation.

“You two are being weird.” You say. They exchange looks, then shrug, and go back to bickering. You stroll past the dining pavilion, and can’t help but look back once. For a second, you could swear there was someone sitting next to Nico. But then it’s gone, and you decide it must be a trick of the firelight. You brush the whole thing to the back of your mind.

A couple weeks later you hear he disappeared from camp, but you don’t think much of it. A lot of people disappear.

. . .

The day your camp truly falls apart, Lee brings your cabin together for a quick meeting. Defenses against the Labyrinth are almost complete. Soon, Luke’s army will be here.

“Pick a hero,” he says, and at first none of us understand. “This especially applies to the ones who’re going to be in the trees. Pick a hero to defend. For the first few waves, feel free to fire into the mass of monsters if you can, but once they push up towards our defenses you need to pick a hero. Archers are for support. Think Ajax and Teucer. Our warriors will be crazy out numbered. Watch their backs as best you can, and try to give them relief where they’re fighting immediately. We can’t afford to lose warriors.” Perhaps it was meant to be mumbled to himself, but you hear him say “Plus it keeps us from all firing in the same place.” That’s the problem with Apollo kids. They all want to kill the big monster, and unless they’re in immediate danger, they don’t pay much attention to everything else.

“Be careful though,” Michael warns, and you feel like his eyes linger on you as they scan across the room. Sometimes you feel that Michael has more of your father’s gift for prophecy than he lets on. “Remember, you’ll guard them, but they won’t know. It’s your job, nothing else.”

You all nod. It’s smart plan. You end up in the trees, scanning the soldiers bellow. Who to pick? The obvious answer would be either Lou or Cecil. Maybe not Lou, because she and Kyla have become really good friends recently, so Kyla will probably cover her. Part of you is a bit jealous of their friendship, but on the other hand you’re really happy for Lou. She isn’t as social as you are, and aside from you, Cecil, and one or two siblings, she doesn’t really have a lot of friends. Plus, it’s good that she has a girlfriend she can talk about things she can’t talk to you and Cecil about.

Before you can find Cecil all hell explodes. Somehow you missed the quest group bursting out of the tunnel. That’s what you get for daydreaming in a time of need. Oh well, it’s kind of hard to miss the flood of monsters. Somehow you thought there would be more time between when the monsters rush out and when the warriors on the ground are overwhelmed. You hear one of your sibling drop from a tree on your right, but don’t have the time to look over at what knocked them down. Now there’s no way you’ll find Cecil, and instead you fire into the tick of the monsters, trusting your muscles,
while your eyes search for an unguarded hero.

You’re not quite sure why, or how, but your eyes find a face you recognize. Nico. Part of you feels a little jaded that you didn’t know he was back, but that part is quickly squashed by a mix of other emotions. Without thinking you begin to guard him. The trick he does with the dead people freaks you out for a few seconds, but that washes away too. More than fear, you feel a kind of awe. His moves are fluid and strong like he’s been sword fighting for ten years instead of a couple of months. For a second you’re tempted to just sit and watch but then there’s a boulder hurdling towards your tree and you’ve got to make a quick escape.

Now that you’re on the ground, you play a different game. Your bow is exchanged for a pouch of ambrosia and a canteen of nectar. Regardless of the danger, you’re ducking and weaving into the mass of clashing bodies to retrieve injured soldiers. You’re a doctor after all. That’s your job.

Occasionally you catch glimpses of Nico through the fray but it’s not much. He leaves almost immediately after the fighting. You’re sad to see him go, but you convince yourself it’s just the fact that he’s a child and he’s all alone out there. Somewhere, deep in the back of your mind, alarm bells sound. Grief turns them off. You can hardly think of anything at all when they burn Lee’s shroud.

. . .

When the war goes to the city, you can’t help but feel like life is ending. You and your siblings sit scattered around the base of the bridge, watching for monsters. Michael sighs at your side. It sounds like he's got the world on his shoulders.

“It’s stupid you know.” He kicks at a piece of rubble lying in the street. It goes flying into a car nearby, leaving a dent. He doesn’t seem to care.

“What part?” you ask, because everything seems pretty pointless and stupid to you right about now.

“They don’t even know,” Michael says. He looks behind himself, east, towards camp. “They don’t even know that we save their lives, perched on rocks like little guardian angels.” His voice is so bitter, that you know exactly what he’s talking about.

“Clarisse was your hero,” you say. He looks up at you, eyes questioning before he slumps in a sigh.

“At the Battle of the Labyrinth, yeah.” For some strange reason, Nico flashes into your head. You guess it must be because you were talking about the battle. There’s nothing really you can say to that, but you try your best.

“Well, you’re here now, and she’s not. Pick a different hero, and watch their back,” you say. Michael looks at you with that same lingering gaze that always makes you think he knows more than he’s letting on.

“Yeah, you’re right. There are better heroes to stick my neck out for.” He grips his bow a little tighter and stands up straight. At the end of the bridge, you can just begin to see the forms of monsters moving towards you. “Hey, Will?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re a good kid.”

Your mind goes blank for a second.

“Oh,” you say. Michael snorts and rolls his eyes like your shock is funny to him. You guess he never
realized just how rarely he gave out compliments, how precious they were to you and your siblings.

“One more thing,” he says as he draws his bowstring. “You know never to pick the same hero twice right? ” He doesn’t look at you while he says it, but you can still feel his gaze. “Focusing on a single person, pouring everything we have into watching their back . . . It’s dangerous for us.” His eyes flicker over to you just briefly, and you nod.

Michael fires his arrow and you think about Nico.

. . .

You spend day after day fighting death in the infirmary, and night after night fighting it in the streets. It had drained you. You look down at your hands, at the cracked sidewalk of New York City’s streets. You’re tried. Gods, you are so tired. Somewhere high above, in the sick bays of Olympus Cecil is scowling with a dislocated shoulder and multiple fractures in his leg. You had to leave him, knowing that no healing would do any of them any good if you all got slaughtered.

To your left, you see Lou. She cut her hair. You guess that keeping it long was too much work in war. It’s boy short now, and somehow you think that it just looks right like that. She waves to you through the crowd, and you exchange a few words of parting before backtracking to your position by the doors.

You feel the hope drain out of your body when Kronos himself comes. It’s like something in you breaks, and you just . . . can’t. You have one arrow left. In front of you and to the right, you can see Lou, fighting for all she’s worth. It never ceases to amaze you how much she’s grown since her mother claimed her. You guess that you weren’t the only one who learned how to work for things that day. The mist dances around her, obscuring and twisting her figure so enemy attacks slash and miss. All you can think about is how she’s going to die soon. How you’re all going to die.

Then like three years ago, you slap yourself back to reality. You’re not dead yet. If Kronos and his goons are going to get inside, you’re going to take out a chunk of them first. And just as you notch your last arrow, it happens. A path splits down the middle of the attacking army, and there he stands.

Nico di Angelo walks like nothing in the world can touch him. The tip of his blade scratches against the ground once, twice. The sounds of it makes the monsters on either side of him flinch. He speaks to the titan lord so calmly; you almost believe that it’s just Luke and Nico fighting. Then the lord of death himself rumbles down the alleyway and comes to a stop next to his son. You don’t know if Hades intended this, but the way he pulls up at Nico’s side almost makes Nico look like a god too.

It hardly even fazes you when Kronos throws the wall up, cutting off all but the best heroes from the rest of the army. In fact, it kind of makes you smile. Kronos is afraid. He wants to run to Olympus while he still can. You look at Nico, and now you definitely smile. He raises his sword, and with it comes an army of the dead.

Michael’s words ring in your head: never choose the same hero twice. But you can’t help it. For a moment, Nico looks like everything. He’s the underdog, the outcast, the one no one paid any attention to. As he stands there sword raised, he is every story and every hero you were ever taught to love. He’s the hero who bested the odds, who defends the people who scorned him, who made a name for himself despite the odds, who saves the day. And he doesn’t even know that you stand atop a pile of rubble, firing arrow after scavenged arrow, like a guardian angel.

In that moment, that shining gauze of hero worship melts away, and you see a kid. For the first time it hits you that he’s twelve. When you were twelve, the most frightening thing you had to face, was an empousai and the possibility of your friend dying. Nico is fighting to save the world, every last
living camper and he’s doing it at the head of an army of the dead. The more you think about it, the more you realize that there’s nothing glorious to this. It’s tragic. It’s all fucking tragic.

Still, you can’t help but stand there, firing arrows and feeling hope surge back through your arms at the sight of him. It’s tragic, but damn if it isn’t inspiring. Hard work, you think. That kid’s put in some damn hard work.

. . .

You see him at camp a couple of times. He comes to the infirmary, but they have you stationed in the critical ward, so you don’t get the chance to talk to him. You only manage to see him a few times, but he’s sleeping. He looks like an absolute angle when he sleeps, which is fitting as his last name is di Angelo.

By the time your work has lightened up, he’s already out of the infirmary. You still don’t see him very often, but every once in a while he comes to the archery field. He’s really bad, but you kind of find it endearing.

“Keep both eyes open,” you tell him while he’s trying to sight the arrow. Your voice only seems to start him, and the shot is so wide he nearly sticks Kyla. His face is bright red.

“What?” he asks. When he turns to look at you, he doesn’t actually look at you. His eyes are trained to the ground.

“When you aim your bow, keep both eyes open. Otherwise your depth perception will be off,” you say, watching to see if he takes your advice. Nico shuffles his feet, but pulls another arrow out of his quiver, notching and drawing. His arms are like boards, locking in tight to his shoulders. He’s too stiff, but you don’t think telling him that right now would really help him relax. You watch the way his chest rises and falls as he takes one deep breath. When he fires the arrow, it sticks into the outer most ring of the target. You prepare to console him, but when he turns to you his face is bright, maybe a little bit awed. This time, he looks you in the eye and your chest swells with a kind of strange pride.

“I hit the target,” he says. The only thing running through your mind is: cute.

“Yeah, way to go.” You guess being in Apollo gives you a skewed idea of what’s a ‘good’ shot.

“Thanks,” Nico blurts, and then looks embarrassed. You smile at that.

“No problem.”

“I’m Nico di Angelo by the way.” I know, you think. He sticks out his hand, and you shake it.

“Will Solace.” Before you can say anymore, one of your brothers is calling you over. “I gotta go, but keep practicing. Oh and, relax a bit. It’ll help with your aim.” He looks down at his bow as if your advice is some kind of riddle the weapon will answer. Then he nods. His expression is still the same. You stare at him for maybe three more seconds before your brother calls you again.

. . .

“Over here!” Lou waves to you from her spot at the campfire. Beside her, Cecil is bartering stolen goods with one of the other Hermes kids. He nods to you briefly before going back to his work. It seems he’s trying to sell a six-pack of coke in exchange for some firecrackers. Technically speaking you’re supposed to be leading the campfire sing along, but you passed this duty off to Kyla. She likes to do it more anyhow.
“You’re looking chipper,” Lou comments lightly, but she has that look of no good mischief.

“Just had a good day,” you say with a shrug, which is kind of true. You had to pull an arrow out of one of your siblings, but that happens a lot (Apollo kids usually get stuck tutoring kids with really bad aim) so it’s kind of stopped affecting you.

“Oh really? Any particular reason you’re bumming around out here with us instead of leading the sing along?” You’re so flustered by the question that it doesn’t occur to you how stupid it is to be flustered. After all, you sit with them a lot. It’s not like this is a new thing. She has no reason to suspect that you’re hoping to be in the vicinity of someone. That would be ridiculous because you’re not.

“Your girlfriend is a better singer,” you say. Lou flushes red up to her ears. She sputters a string of ‘it’s not’ and ‘I mean we’re’ and other words that don’t quite make a complete thought but communicate the general idea. Then, to your surprise she takes a slow calm breath and frowns.

“You know what, yes. I do like Kyla. Unlike, someone, I’m not going to be afraid of admitting that I have a crush,” she says. That hits you like a freight train, because you don’t have a crush, certainly not one you maybe stare at all the time, what on earth is she- Suddenly Nico comes out of the shadows like he was there the whole time and you nearly leap out of your skin. You look over to Lou Ellen only to see that her eyes are as wide as dinner plates. Somewhere in the back of your brain you’re incredibly thankful that she’s too shocked to make some joke.

“Speak of the devil,” she mutters, side eyeing you. You think that statement is totally inappropriate and you have no idea why she would say that.

“What?” Nico asks, and she looks even more startled that he might have heard her.

“Oh nothing.” She laughs nervously, and waves a dismissive hand. Nico glances around at you all. You’re frozen in a bit of panic. Out of the corner of your eye, you can see that Cecil has shoved his firecrackers behind his back, and is looking everywhere but the demigod that suddenly appeared. Lou keeps looking between you and Nico like she expects you to say something. Something flickers over Nico’s face and he looks back at the ground.

“Sorry,” he mutters, and then it’s like he’s gone again, blending with the shadows as he finds a different place to sit. Something in your heart twists. You sock Lou in the arm, not terribly hard.

“Nice going Lulu,” you say. Maybe you’re a little too bitter.

“Well you could have just invited him to sit with us,” she says. When Kyla starts to sing that pout melts right off. Even you forget about the little fiasco.

. . .

Nico leaves a week later. You didn’t see him at the campfire again. You only know he left because Percy was talking to Chiron loudly about it, insisting that he be allowed a quest to look for the son of Hades. No one else had heard anything (which you know because you must have interrogated every gossip in camp). Somewhere in the back of your mind you’re a little frustrated that Nico didn’t tell you he was leaving. You brush it off.

. . .

If there is anything more horrifying than being under siege by an army of two hundred Romans and three times as many monsters, it’s delivering an angry satyr baby while the jittery father brandishes a baseball bat and eats your medical equipment. There was so much screaming. So. Much. Screaming.
As soon as you can, you get the fuck out of that building. Outside Lou and Cecil are waiting for you. They’re both snickering at your misfortune.

“So glad you came to show your support,” you gripe at them.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Lou asks.

“Boy. Clarisse has been named godmother,” you reply, heaving a sigh and running a hand through your hair. “I think I’m going to be scarred for the rest of my life.” Lou rolls her eyes and Cecil snorts a laugh.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Lou says. You look her dead in the eyes, face grave.

“I’ve seen things, terrible things.” Cecil clutches his stomach and nearly keels over from laughing. Lou laughs as well. You’re barely able to keep your face straight for a few moments.

“The miracle of life aside,” Cecil says, as he tries to school his expression. “We’re here to recruit you for a super top secret mission.”

“Lay it on me.”

“We’re going to spy on the enemies,” Lou jumps in. Cecil looks perturbed, but only momentarily.

“We’re going to mess with Romans,” he says.

“We are not going to mess with Romans.”

“Well you might not, but-”

“I’m in,” you say before they get carried away with their bickering.

... You are an idiot. It’s not a feeling you’re used to since you decided you were going to become the camp’s head medic. But now, looking at Nico while he stares back at you incredulously, you can’t help it. You are a complete and total idiot. Lee’s words that first day in the Apollo cabin circle in your head. The realization that Nico doesn’t actually know who you are, and that you don’t actually really know him hits you like a freight train. Then you’re angry with yourself, and with Nico and with everything. This is all stupid and it’s all Nico’s fault, him and his stupid adorable face. That thought only makes you angrier at yourself, and you scowl. Stupid crush. Stupid boy.

“Hey, we’re scouting the enemy. We took precautions.” Because really, you can’t believe that the son of Hades would go on a solo mission like this totally unprepared. He’s so conspicuous. You could spot him in the middle of a crowd. Seriously look at that face. Like hell no one is going to notice him.

“You dressed in black,” Nico notes, “with the sun coming up. You painted your face but didn’t cover that mop of blond hair. You might as well have been waving a yellow flag.” You really aren’t used to feeling stupid, and it doesn’t occur to you to mention that you’ve actually been out here since before the sun was coming up. It also doesn’t help that his stupid face is scrambling your brain. You really want to grab his hand and tug him down next to you (and maybe kiss his face).

“Lou Ellen wrapped some Mist around us too.” Lou looks more than a little flustered being put on the spot like that. You feel a bit bad. She had been covering all three of you on and off for a while now, her Mist is probably thinning.
“Hi,” Lou says, waving at him shortly. “You’re Nico right? I’ve heard a lot about you.” She has that look on her face, and you take back what you said about feeling bad. You give her your most vicious ‘knock it off’ look and you know she can see it out of the corner of her eye because she quickly continues speaking. “And this is Cecil, from Hermes cabin.”

You hold back a sigh. It’s going to be a very long and very romantically and sexually frustrating night.

Chapter End Notes

Wow this got a lot longer than I wanted it go, but oh well. Hope you liked it. I'm kind of in college so the likelihood of me keeping up a regular work schedule with this is slim to none, but i'll do my best. I just really like writing about Will being a big dummy and it is my personal belief that he totally had a crush on Nico before the book started.

Also apparently in the Polish translation, Lou Ellen was accidentally introduced as a boy, which is why I put in the whole thing about her cutting her hair, so she looks more boyish. I love girls that look like boys, it's so cute. Also I kind of accidentally made her in love with her best friend. . . oops.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

THIS IS SO MUCH LONGER THAN I EXPECTED.

I'm kind of sorry about the huge amount of prolog. I didn't want to skip over the events in the book, but I also didn't want to rewrite every Solangelo scene. I hope this is kind of happy median.

Also I play around with narrative style a bit more when doing some of Nico's thoughts so tell me what you think. I think I rewrote that scene like nine times.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You were right. It's no surprise really; you're right about most things. But this, you were particularly right about. It seems the two of your argue about everything. Every other word Nico seems to be glaring at you.

“Excuse me?” Glare

“Coach hedge told me all about your shadow-travel. You can’t try that again.” Glare

“I just did try it again, Solace. I’m fine.” Glare. Gods above, you’re just trying to help, and maybe hold his hands (which is still happening, oh wait . . . Nope, no he pulled his hands away).

“No, you’re not.” Gods above Nico, I know about this stuff. “I’m a healer. I could feel the darkness in your hand as soon as I touched it.” Are you pretending it’s not there? Do you not care? “Even if you made it to that tent you’d be in no shape to fight.” It’s a suicide mission, surely you see that? “But you wouldn’t make it. One more slip and you won’t come back.” I am not letting you kill yourself over this. “You are not shadow-traveling. Doctor’s order.”

“The camp is about to be destroyed-”

“And we’ll stop the Romans.” You take a second to glance at your friends, beside you. “Lou Ellen will control the mist. We’ll sneak around; do as much damage as we can to those onagers. But no shadow-travel.”
“But-”

“No.” You look to Cecil and Lou for backup, but their heads are bouncing back and forth like they’re watching tennis, and you have the very strong urge to smack them over the head. *This is not funny you nitwits, this is serious.* They willfully ignore your frustrated looks. For a few seconds, Nico looks distracted, and you guess that he’s milling things over. You take this time to elbow the two.

“Thanks for the help,” you whisper. Lou has to cover her mouth to stifle a giggle.

“We just can’t help it man. After all this time, you’re finally talking to the great Nido di Angelo and-”

“What do you mean after all this time?”

“Please, Will,” Lou says. “Don’t pretend-”

“Whatever,” Nico says, jolting you all out of your whispered banter. He doesn’t seem to have noticed, though you note the slight blush on his cheeks. Maybe he did hear you, *shit.* “But we have to hurry. And you’ll follow my lead.” The blush fades quickly, and he’s obviously pretty focused, so you decide that he probably didn’t hear you. Good.

“Fine.” *I’d follow you to Hades and back Nico,* you think, and then immediately hate yourself for it. “Just don’t ask me to birth any more satyr babies and we’ll get along great.”

... 

While you’d like to say that the rest of the morning went something like that, with you acting like the very mature medical professional you are and preventing anyone from doing stupid things, you really can’t. You happen to be a son of Apollo, and calm reasoning is not among the gifts you and your siblings tend to foster.

“Got this.” You tell Nico, when one of the guards sees straight through the mist. You’re fast, it should be fine, and it’s just one guy. You take off running and he starts chasing you.
One guy turns into two. Two turns into four. Four turns into six. That’s about the time you realize that you did not have a real plan for how you were going to actually get out of this. Thankfully, Nico proves to be more than hero enough. You’re fast, but Nico must be faster because he catches up to you and the guards in record time. He then proceeds to save you, like a knight in shining armor. During the fight, you can’t help but think you should be helping somehow. You also can’t help but think that Nico fights kind of like a dancer, with deliberate yet fluid strokes. All of that tension in this body seems to jump out like static shocks where he makes contact with the guards.

You punch him in the shoulder lightly, smiling all the while. “Thanks for the assist. Six at once isn’t bad.” He doesn’t get the joke. You think that’s adorable.

...  

Nico summons skeletons and you are so frustrated you can’t even think straight. You told him no more darkness stuff. It’s going to kill him, and he is so freaking thick that it makes you want to punch him. How the hell are you supposed to help protect Nico when the son of Hades is his own worst enemy?

“You idiot.” You throw your arm around his shoulder, and when you expect to feel warmth, maybe a tingly sensation at the physical contact, all you’re met with is cold. Dread pools in the bottom of your stomach. Nico doesn’t feel like the living. “I told you no more of that Underworld magic.”

“I’m fine.”

“Shut up. You’re not.” You can’t even deal with this right now. You feel like a kid of Janus, flipping back and forth between two extremes. On the one hand you want to kiss him till life floods back into him, on the other hand you want to knock his lights out. In the end neither wins. It’s the doctor in you that takes over. “Take this,” you say, handing him the gum.

“You want me to chew gum?” For the love of the gods di Angelo, I am seriously running out of patience.

“It’s medicinal. Should keep you alive and alert for a few more hours.” He eats it, and just when you think that’s the end of it he starts complaining.

“Tastes like tar and dirt.”
“Stop complaining.” The rebellious part of your brain wonders if Nico would taste like tar and dirt if you kissed him.

“Hey.” Cecil limps over to you two, the old wound he got during the Battle of Manhattan acting up again. He probably overextended the weak muscle there. You make a mental note to scold him later. “You guys kind of missed the fighting.” By the way he’s looking between the two of you, you can tell that he’s going to give you Hades about this for it for the rest of your life.

…

So the Roman attack wasn’t the greatest thing to ever happen. Thankfully half of them are dog people, so you don’t actually have to really fight them. Perks of being a song of Apollo, you know? Sure the fact that they’re going to investigate Cecil’s handiwork is bad, but Cecil is a genius. Now you may be a bit biased, but you think he’s second only to the Stoll brothers in sly trickery. Anyway, none of that is really the worst. What’s the worst, is Octavian.

Just looking at him you know. You remember what Lee told you, all those years ago, the lesson he taught you about obsession. In Octavian you can see everything that has ever shamed you about being a child of Apollo. He is sick with his need for glory, obsessed with it, lifting up his evils, like Apollo did with the Laurel. Yet even now, others listen to him. That charm, that light, that you and all of your siblings share, he’s using it to tear down innocent lives. It burns you up with a rage that not even the presence of two hundred roman soldiers, a hoard of monsters, and the presence of your best friends can quell.

Then there’s the way he talks to Nico. For all of his ambition, you are resentful, but you can’t really hate him. Some part of you realizes that he could be you. It wouldn’t be that hard to get power drunk the way he is. You know how good it feels when you walk through camp and people look at you that way. You can’t hate him for wanting that glory.

What you can hate him for, is how he won’t stop. Everything is evil in excess. It’s one of the central dogma of being a doctor. Too much will kill worse than too little. Even corrupting one thing, your father’s name, doesn’t seem to be enough for him. He has to try and corrupt everything else too. *Nico has had enough corruption in his life, you want to scream, leave him alone.* Of course you don’t say anything. Part of you is afraid. You don’t want to be like Octavian. You don’t want to be the son of Apollo that uses his charm to bend other’s will. You don’t want to put Nico between the two of you, pulling him around like a rag doll because you think *you’re* the one who deserves the laurel.

Then Nico starts to snap back, all of that fire and passion going toe to toe with Octavian’s delusional rhetoric. It’s better, you think. *He’s better.* Octavian is hollow, dead inside. Nico is alive, full of
anger and will and a thousand other things that make him stand down that sham prophet. For a
second you want to cheer. Then he says something that near breaks your heart.

“I don’t want a place in their camp,” Now you see how deeply that darkness you felt earlier runs.
That anger that fills him is rotting him from the inside. That life just might be the death of him.
“When this war is over, I’m leaving both camps for good.”

“Why would you do that?” It sounds so childish, even to your own ears, but you can’t help it. At
your side you feel Lou take your hand and give it a slight squeeze. Cecil puts his hand on your
shoulder. What could drive Nico away again? Who would push him away, after everything he’d
done, with all the people who care about him and-

“It’s none of your business,” He snarls at you and Lee’s words flash through your head.

*Little more than strangers*

*Hardly know our name*

That you understand. You understand that you don’t know him. There must be a reason; someone
said something, or a place he’s going to go instead.

Then Nico looks at you and he continues, "It's none of your business, but I don’t belong. That’s
obvious."

*That's a lie. Your hearts leaps up into your throat. You belong here more than any of us. What is a
hero if not someone who fights fate? You may be a son of Hades, but you're alive.*

Nico scoffs, shrugs, and then says, “No one wants me.”

That you can’t stand, you absolutely can’t stand, because you don’t know him, but the gods as your
witnesses, you care about him. You want him.

“Oh please,” you say, shaking Cecil’s grip from your shoulder, and wrenching your hand out of
Lou’s. “Nobody at Camp Half-Blood ever pushed you away.” *We wanted you to say, I wanted you
to stay. “You have friends- or at least people who would like to be your friends.” Me, you think, you
have me. Just ask, Nico. “If you’d get your head out of that brooding cloud of yours for once-“*
“Enough!” Octavian butts in, and all you can think is Oh no you don’t. You are not going to deal with this son of an Oedipus too. Not now. His words blur together, as your mind boils in its own rage and frustration. Then you hear the words “The god Apollo—” and you lose it.

“No!” Before you know what you’re doing you’re in that disgrace’s face. “I am a son of Apollo, you anemic loser.” Part of you wishes desperately you had practiced the poetic skills like some of your siblings, but now you’ll just have to make due with what simple words your exhausted and enraged mind can conjure. “My father hasn’t shown anyone the future, because the power of prophecy isn’t working.” It’s almost embarrassing to admit, but you don’t care. “But this—” You wave at everything, because it’s all so completely fucked up. “This is not what Apollo would want!”

You know it’s true. No god is perfect, but no god would wish this. Octavian starts up, accusing you of lying. His words start to climb in pitch, sounding near hysterical, when the catapults go off. After that you don’t remember much.

The plan works, but your side comes rushing over the hill.

You stop the rush of Greeks, and a huge statue descends from the sky.

The earth trembles. The monsters come.

It all reminds you of the rush of the Battle of Manhattan, except Cecil is at your side instead of up in the infirmary.

It all seems to end just as fast.

... 

You are a doctor. You are intimately familiar with what kills demigods. You are all immensely fragile in the sense that both the divine and the mortal can kill you. But you are also so incredibly resilient, that hardly any physicality can kill you. In your time as a doctor, you have come to realize that just about any demigod can survive just about any wound that doesn’t instantly kill them, if they get medical attention fast enough. If they have the chance to struggle through, they usually will. No, physical damage isn’t really what kills demigods.
What kills demigods is the trauma. A demigod can beat just about anything if they really try, but sometimes . . . well sometimes they don’t want to try. Would you, if you knew that every year the world fell apart a little more, and every time you killed a monster they were just reborn? How much would you want to keep fighting, if you had seen the best minds of your generation drop to their knees on the sidewalks of Manhattan, with a blood stain blooming from their chest like a poppy sprouted from their shirt pocket.

Everyone knows what the answer should be. It should be the easy way out. But that’s the thing about demigods. They aren’t all that fond of the easy way out. You can give them a hundred chances to just lie down for good, but they’ll keep walking. They keep getting up.

People sometimes laugh at you when you say you have faith in the world. They say ‘with all of these bad things, how can you be so optimistic?’ Most of the time you want to look at them and tell them, ‘How could I not? I have seen a kid screaming and writhing on an infirmary table one day, madness eating away the last of his will, and sitting holding hands singing at the campfire not two weeks later. I have seen a kid with poison coursing through their veins, smile and say it’s nothing when their friends ask if it hurts, because they want to protect them no matter how much it hurts. I’ve seen my own brothers willingly lay down their life for the world’s greatest heroes, knowing that they themselves will die in near anonymity. I’ve seen a kid fight and claw his way back from the brink of death because his little sister was out on the battle line, and he was not going to let her fight alone. How could I not have faith when I’ve seen that kind of good?’ Instead, you usually just shrug, and smile. That’s a lot to explain to someone, and you’re not the best with words.

You are intimately familiar with what kills demigods. When Nico holds his hand out, and says, “Will, we can’t stop him,” you already know. What kills demigods isn’t so much the physical stuff as it is the mental. When you looked at Octavian, you knew. He was dead long before he pulled that lever.

The infirmary is an absolute disaster. The Romans that come in to be treated insist that they get treatment from the Roman doctors, which is crazy, because the last thing you would ever do is give a bunch of unknown doctors the run of your hospital. Even when you do let Roman doctors in to help, things only seem to get worse.

First off, they don't know your hospital procedures. They don't know where your equipment is kept or where to put it back. There is nothing more frustrating and more nerve racking than reaching for a scalpel and realizing it isn’t there. Worse yet, they all deny that they moved it, so you have to send Austin, your nurse, to go look for it when he should be taking care of patients.

Secondly, they’re not actually all that great as doctors. There are one or two children of doctor gods,
but your Roman brothers and sisters are much more ... military. They can stitch up a wound or set a bone in seconds flat, but apparently Romans don't sing hymns. In fact they seem against any kind of lyricism in the ward. They keep trying to tell Austin to stop reciting poetry. When you try to work out a compromise both are okay with, your nurse replies with a fiery, “None left but by submission and that word disdain forbids me!”

When the Romans realize where those lines came from, they try even harder to get him to stop. You never thought there would come a day when you had to ban javelins from your infirmary. There is also the whole Roman obsession with unicorn drought. You have no idea what that does, and very little time to bother finding out.

Thirdly, Romans do not take orders well. Or rather, they all take orders like a pro ... when the orders come from a Roman doctor. Despite the fact that it is most definitely your infirmary, they seem more than content to ignore your orders. In fact, for a while, it's almost like they're occupying your hospital, having created a nice little Roman enclave for themselves.

Needless to say the first few hours in the infirmary are more than a little stressful for everyone. Things work out eventually. Turns out unicorn drought is a really great anti-depressant and pain killer. Plus the patients can drink as much of it as they want. It’s not so great for healing wounds like the way pouring nectar will mend the tissue, but it keeps the patients strong without threat of combustion. Then after they see how well the hymns work (especially when Kyla's the one singing them) they all insist on learning. They even start to defer to you, as the head doctor after a day or so.

Still, you can’t say you're really all that cut up to see them go. It means that Austin goes back to reciting random lines of poetry, but you had pretty much accepted that as a fact of life. With the Romans leaving, your infirmary will be a lot calmer, and a lot less crowded. It also means that you can take a break because you know the other doctors will keeps things in order.

When you step outside for the first time in ages, the sun is shining, and you lift a quiet prayer to your father. Gods know he’s going to need it. Then you lift a prayer to just about every deity out there because Zeus knows you’re going to need it. Just across the way Nico di Angelo is standing outside the Hades cabin. You haven’t seen him in two days, which is crazy, because everyone else has come by. You think he’s avoiding you, which is dumb, but also really worrying, because you don’t know what you’d done to turn him away . . . Okay that’s kind of a lie. You have a lot of ideas about why he wouldn’t want to talk to you, but mostly you just want to talk to him and know that he’s not really leaving again.

It also doesn’t help that he’s talking to boy wonder like they’re old friends. You remember Lee’s words again: Jealous and possessive. You resolve not to be that kind of person. Then Jason scoops Nico up in a hug and it actually looks like Nico is returning it. Your resolve crumbles like piecrust. Nico could barely hold your hand or lean on you for more than a second before pulling away. Why does the all American boy over there get to hug Nico? Just because he’s the son of Zeus, and he
saved the world, and he has gorgeous blue eyes, and he looks like Captain America, only kind of smart because of the glasses, doesn’t mean he’s really all that great . . . Nico looks your way, and you take the chance.

*You. Here. Now.*

. . .

Okay, so maybe that was not the best way to start a conversation, but in your defense you were not in the best frame of mind. You had had a stressful few days, and the fact that the first thing you saw when you finally emerged into the sunshine was your crush hugging some other stupid guy. You were a little frustrated.

“How can you even talk to me like that?” Nico asks, absolutely appalled by your behavior. “Don’t you know I can summon zombies and skeletons and-”

“Right now you couldn’t summon a wishbone without melting into a pile of darkness di Angelo.” You can see the way he gets all flustered at that, like he’s gearing up to deny your totally reasonable assertions. “I told you, no more Underworld-y stuff, doctor’s orders. You owe me at least three days of rest in the infirmary. Starting now.” You add that last part on so he doesn’t have the chance to equivocate out of this situation.

. . .

You don’t actually have all that much time to talk to Nico the first day he’s in the infirmary. One of the patients has an infection relapse from a wound to the shoulder, so you end up spending most of your time treating that, and then making rounds to the few kids who had serious operations preformed. Around lunch (really, it’s more like 1:30, because you never get an early lunch) you carve out the time to talk with him.

“*Hey,*” you say quietly as you sit down at his bedside. He had his nose buried in some book you’re not sure who leant him, but he looks up when you sit down.

“Hey, yourself,” Nico says, setting the book aside. You don’t quite see the title. He notices the little old tin lunchbox you have in your hand and raises a quiet eyebrow.
“Yeah, yeah. I know it’s lame,” you say, plopping it down on your lap and popping open the metal latches. Inside your lunch is basic but well balanced, mostly because you can’t be bothered to put more than the basics inside. Every once and a while Cecil will sneak you a coke, but today you’ve just got a ham sandwich, some carrots, a bottle of water, and a little bundle of grapes.

“What cartoon is it?” he asks, and that surprises you.

“It’s not a cartoon, it’s Spider-man. You do know who Spider-man is, right?” Nico continues to look at you blankly, though he nods his head. It occurs to you that maybe Nico missed out on a lot of normal kid stuff. You find it kind of hard to believe that anyone growing up in the modern world could have missed Spider-man, but Nico seemed to miss out a lot on life. In the corner of your mind, you resolve to expose Nico to all of the things he missed out on as a kid.

“Hey, Will?” Kyla calls you from the other side of the infirmary. “We’ve got a bit of a problem.” You can tell by the way she says it that it’s actually a huge problem and she just doesn’t want to freak you out.

“I’ll be right back, promise,” you tell Nico, shoving half a sandwich in your mouth and setting the box down on your seat. He nods at you, and picks his book back up. Out of the corner of your eye, you catch the title: \textit{Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead}.

Meanwhile Nico di Angelo is seriously beginning to regret his life choices. This whole spending time in the infirmary thing sounded good at the start, but now he just feels overwhelmed. First there was the constant stream of noise. You and the other doctors don’t seem to notice, which only makes Nico feel worse. Between the low sung hymns, there’s the tapping of medical equipment and hands and the clicking of cart wheels as it bring meals and ferries tools Nico couldn’t name. There’s also the matter of the one guy spouting of poetry. It’s kind of beautiful, but also greatly disturbing. Nico doesn’t know much about poetry and the verses sound so much like prophecy that he’s left with the feeling that he has missed something crucial.

Besides, you were only there for a few moments, before you left again. It was your idea in the first place. Nico thinks you should be around if you promised. He also tries not to think about what a fool he made of himself in front of you. Of course Nico’s heard of Spider-man, even if he was never really sure who Spider-man was. He thinks that he should have been able to guess considering all of the web patterning. Sometimes Nico feels like he’s drowning in all of this strange new modern stuff. Just when he has his feet on the ground something new comes out of nowhere.

“Hey!” The sudden sound of a voice so close to Nico has him jumping out of his skin. When the son of Hades turns to see who had the skill to sneak up on him, he’s greeted by a friendly face. Well he thinks it’s friendly. With the children of Hermes, one can never really tell.

“Neat book,” is the reply he gets.

“Oh, thanks I guess.” He's unsure of what to do now, mostly because he’s never really interacted with Cecil himself. “Jason leant it to me to pass the time.” The addition feels forced. He curses himself a bit. Cecil hums as if that were a very interesting fact. Then the son of Hermes seems to notice the open lunchbox sitting on the seat.

“Oh geez, that idiot hasn’t even eaten yet. Wish I had known that before . . .” Cecil just shakes his head and picks up the lunchbox.

“What do you mean before?” Nico asks. His guard flies up without a second thought. Cecil only shrugs, though his eyes flicker over to the other end of the infirmary.

“Not much,” he says taking the seat. “Just that I would have had Lou or Kyla drag him out to lunch instead of all of that mist nonsense.”

“What?” This is almost as bad as listening to that one boy’s poetry.

“Don’t worry about it. Want a soda?” Cecil seems to make it appear out of thin air, and who knows, maybe he did. The more Nico learns about this demigod the less he feels like he’s got both feet on the ground.

“No thanks,” Nico says, eyeing the coke with thinly veiled suspicion. Cecil seems to find that funny because he smirks and says, “Suit yourself,” before popping the little metal tab.

“What do you want?” Nico doesn’t mean for it to come out like such a harsh demand, but he can’t really help it. It was bad enough just sitting in this patchwork hospital ward by himself, but having to deal with a kid like this, who makes no sense, it's just too much. He’s tired. He’s tired of everything.

“Just to check on you,” Cecil says with a raised eyebrow. Shame floods up, Nico’s neck, but he doesn’t back down. He knows when someone is prying. It’s happened to him plenty of times before.
“And?”

“And ask you a favor.” There it is. People always want something.

“What is it?” Nico’s voice is sharp and cold. He wishes he could just shadow travel out of this situation, but you made him promise bed rest. “I’m not guaranteeing I’ll do it, but you can tell me anyway.” Cecil seems to consider this statement for a second, before leaning back in the chair. His hands absentmindedly fiddle with the latches on the old lunch pail.

“Be careful with Will. Look out for him for us,” Cecil says.

So many things about that statement throw Nico off, but the first thing that comes out of his mouth is, “Us?”

“Ah, that’s right. Guess you missed Lou coming in earlier.” He nods towards the back of the infirmary like that should clear things up. It doesn’t. Nico is too uncomfortable to ask for further clarification. He feels like he’s missed something crucial. “So will you?”

“Will I what?”

“You know, keep him in mind.” Cecil gives what is perhaps the most vague hand gesture Nico’s ever seen.

“Why?” The question is more a statement of confusion, and less one of ‘why should I?’ Thankfully Cecil seems to understand. In answer he holds up the lunch box.

“That kid will break his back trying to help everyone. I want you do me a favor and remember that. He’ll think about you before he thinks of himself.” The fact that he addresses Nico in the last line throws the later off once again. There’s also something about the way Cecil says it, that makes Nico nervous. Nico isn’t used to having to think about other people. He doesn’t like to be responsible for other people. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Nico is aware that a slow tune has sprung up. The poetry kid walks by, singing quietly while a few other doctors sing a quiet background.

“When the day met the night, she was drinking tea in a garden . . .” The song continues, though it’s
almost ephemeral in how soft it is.

“That’s my cue,” Cecil says, getting to his feet.

“Yes,” Nico blurs. For a second, he’s not sure why he said it. Cecil doesn’t seem to understand what
Nico is talking about, but after a few seconds he gets it. He smiles and nods. Then he leave.

While the song continues to hum through the infirmary, Nico feels himself relaxing. He’s not used to
being responsible for other people. But there’s a part of him, deep down, that remembers what it was
like when someone was caring for him. Perhaps that’s what Cecil meant. Friend ship goes both way,
Nico thinks. You have been trying to support Nico, so Nico thinks that maybe he’ll look out for you
too.

Still so much of this is all too new, and all too overwhelming. Nico is tired. The sound of that song is
so sweet, that it puts him to sleep.

Your name is Will Solace and you did not keep your promise. One of the patients had a relapsing
fever that you had to bring down, and then you turned around for half a second, and it seemed like
he was totally fine? And Lou was there, whistling, in a weird suspicious way. But then someone's
stitches got infected, and one thing led to another. By the time you manage to get back to Nico, he’s
fallen asleep. You can’t bring yourself to wake him up. Instead, you sit by his bed in a beaten old
plastic chair and join him in sleep.

When Nico wakes up, he sees you there by his side. He doesn’t regret his choices quite as much.

Chapter End Notes

Austin's lines are from Milton's Paradise Lost. They're said by Satan, when he's thinking
over the idea of repentance. "Is there no place left for repentance, none for pardon left?
None left but by submission and that word disdain forbids me. . ."

If you couldn't tell what the deal with Cecil was, he and Lou (and Kyla who was not
active in planning, but was complacent) had set up a fake medical emergency courtesy
to the mist. There was no attempted treating of the actual kid who had a relapse, he was
just to the right of an empty bed where Lou Ellen used her mist. Cecil wanted to talk to
Nico about Will, because he knew that Will liked Nico, but wasn't too sure about where
Nico stood. He is now pretty satisfied that Nico not's some huge insensitive asshole. However that is not the end of the sibling screening. There's going to be a lot of sibling screening, from both sides of the relationship.

The song they used as a signal is "When the day met the night" By Panic! at the Disco.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I really do love Will Solace. That being said, some of the shit he said in BOO was really not acceptable. He needs to have a lot of character development. Also I'm sorry this chapter is so long, but that's probably going to be the pattern from now on. Also if anyone is a native Italian speaker I'm sorry. This is google translate Italian, and it's bad. Also (I swear this is the last one), I really love Percy (one of my biggest book crushes, I feel you Nico), but you've got to admit that the kid isn't the brightest bulb in the box.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The second day is good, you think. Or rather, it's going to be good. You have resolved to make it better. It won't be hard, really, considering that yesterday you spent all of five minutes with him. Just about anything is going to be better than those paltry words.

“Okay, so last name di Angelo, first name Nico.” You're currently filling out his health records, because it turns out that he doesn’t have any. It’s not that strange a thing to happen. Documents get lost coming back and forth, and hospitals are usually more than a little reluctant to release children’s medical records to a strawberry farm. “Okay, where were you born?”

“Venice, Italy.” He answers quietly. You whistle long and low.

“Wow, Venice? Like, the city of water, the one where people take gondolas instead of taxis?” You’re sure your eyes are as big as dinner plates.

“It’s not that cool.” He rolls his eyes at you, like you’re a child.

“Can you speak Italian?” You ask, unfazed by his apathy.

“No, it’s the only national language.” You wonder how can someone so tiny and so sickly contain so much sass?

“Alright then, say something in Italian.” Nico purses his lips, thinking. You scratch away at the corner of his medical record, making absent minded doodles.

“Perché lui sembra sempre così felice di essere che mi circonda?” Nico says at last. You have no idea what he’s saying, but it sounds fantastic.

“What does that mean?”

“’I wish you would stop asking so many questions about Venice.’” You know that doesn’t seem right, because he what he said first sounded like a question. Unfortunately you’re pretty sure he won’t give you a straight answer.

“Alright, I get it. When’s your birthday?”

“January 28th.” He replies tiredly. Beside his bed is a tray with a muffin and some fruit on it. Nico had insisted you give him coffee too, but coffee is bad for the heart, so you declined his request. Fifteen very loud minutes later, he had settled back into a half awake demi-god.
“Year?” You could probably guess, but you don’t like doing math.

“Nineteen thirty-two.”

“Alright, nineteen thirty-two.” You look at the sheet of paper, and then back at Nico. “What year did you say?”

“Nineteen thirty-two.” He sighs, like your question was just so wearisome. It takes you a few seconds to get the joke before you start laughing. It warms you a bit to know that Nico tried to pull one over on you.

“Seriously, when were you born?” Nico glares at you in response.

“Nineteen thirty-two.” He says. Your smile falters.

“Alright joke’s over. This is important for your medical file.” You tap the paper for emphasis.

“I am not joking. I was born in nineteen thirty-two.” Nico speaks very slowly as if you are a child.

“That’s ridiculous Nico. That would make you . . .” It takes you a few seconds to do the math.

“Eighty-one years old.”

“Eighty-two.” He corrects. You look at him blankly. He returns your stare, though he looks like he thinks you’re a complete idiot.

“Okay, whatever.” You put down nineteen ninety-nine in the date spot, because Nico is obviously not eighty-two. You’re like, two hundred percent sure he’s fourteen. A few of the other boxes are easy to fill in. He’s male, he’s five foot five, weighs one hundred and fifteen pounds. You did all of those basic measurements when he first came in. Well, obviously you didn’t like, check his biological sex . . .

“Hey, you’re biologically male right?” Just to be safe, you ask. Nico looks confused by the question.

“Yeah,” he says carefully, like he thinks the question is some kind of trap.

“Hey, you never know.” Your statement only seems to make him look more confused. “You know, there are people who are hermaphrodites or transgender.”

"Transgender?" Nico sounds out the word like he's never heard it before.

"People who are assigned one gender at birth but identify as another. We have to ask because the two sexes are at risk for different diseases and stuff. Also, we provide heal-care stuff for people and we can look out for medical problems unique to transitioning.” Nico nods slowly, like he’s trying to process everything you're saying. You guess that he must have been really sheltered growing up or had really conservative parents or something. This isn't the first time you've had to explain something that should have been taught in basic sex ed, and it probably won't be the last. "If you ever have questions about that stuff, you can ask Pollux. His dad is the patron god of questioning gender and sexuality, so he knows a lot. Plus he's just nice to talk to, cool kid. Anyway, the next step is a little more tricky. Do you have any allergies to any medicines?"

“No.”

“Do you have any allergies of any kind?”

“No.”
“Have you had all of your shots?”

“Uh... probably?”

“I’ll just read them off.” You take a second and look up at Nico to see. He looks nervous. “Don’t worry. You’ve probably got most of your shots, except for a few in the last two years or so.” He doesn’t look all that relieved. Well, to be fair, no one likes shots. “Alright, so Diphtheria?”

“Um... Yes?”

“Tenanush?”

“Maybe?”

“Measles?”

“Uh... no.”

“Pertussis?”

“Yes?”

“Mumps?”

“No”

“Rubella”

“How can there be this many vaccines?”

“Science?” you reply. “There’s like a whole branch of medicine dedicated to making vaccines. Anyway, Rubella, yes or no?”

“. . . No.”

You continue rattling off different vaccines, Nico’s face becoming progressively more confused and frustrated.

“Chicken pocks?”

“What?” he asks, clearly bewildered. You stare at him for a second. Who hasn't heard of chicken pocks?

“Chicken pocks, you know, red spots all over your skin. It itches and it sucks.”

"I know what it is," he snaps.

"Well, did you get a vaccine for that, or have you had it?” Nico blinks once or twice and then makes a thoughtful noise.

“No.”

“Polio?”

“Okay,” Nico jumps in, “now I know you’re just messing with me. There’s no polio vaccine.” You stare blankly at Nico.
“What do you mean, there’s no polio vaccine?”

“I mean they don’t have a polio vaccine. Everyone knows that. That’s why FDR was in the wheelchair.” He talks to you like you’re stupid. A realization dawns on you.

“Oh my gods. You really were born in nineteen thirty-two, weren’t you?” Nico groans and rolls his eyes.

“Hades, help me.” You stare at him, mouth agape.

“Nico.”

“What?”

“Is that why you didn’t know who Spider-man was?” Nico’s face flushes a bright scarlet.

“I know who Spider-man is!” he insists. “I’ve heard all of his lines and stuff, I’ve just never seen the actual comic.”

“Oh my gods, you have missed out on so much. You haven’t seen any of the rat pack movies, or the Avengers, or Pixar, or . . . oh my gods, you’ve never seen the Prestige! Holy shit Nico, you poor depraved soul.” Part of your heart breaks for him, but the other part leaps in joy at the opportunity to watch the Prestige again. You fucking love that movie. And it’s not just because Christian Bale was your first celebrity crush, although, not going to lie, that is definitely part of it. You can’t help it if Christian Bale looks good all the time, especially when he’s playing some dark and brooding character. Actually, now that you’re thinking about it-

“It’s not like I’ve lived under a rock for the past four years.” You snap back from daydreams about Christian Bale long enough to catch most of what Nico is saying.

“But you haven’t watched any of those movie.”

“I mean no, but-”

“Excellent.” You slowly drum your fingers together. Nico scowls.

“Don’t do that, that’s creepy.” You smile wickedly, and continue slowly drumming your fingers. “Stop it.” At this point, you can’t hold it. You laughter bubbles out as you. “You have such a twisted sense of humor,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest. He’s totally pouting too.

“Ah come on, you haven’t tried to banish me to the shadow realm yet, so I can’t be that bad.” Nico rolls his eyes but he’s fighting a smile.

“You’re impossible.” The way he says it makes your heart flutter.

. . .

The infirmary picks up in the afternoon as regular camp actives begin to pick up too. A couple kids with arrow wounds wonder in, someone with a broken leg from the climbing wall, and a few satyrs with concussions and splinters all come through. Really, you supposed that you could opt out of infirmary duty, and go participate in a few club activities yourself. However, you’d be lying to if you said you weren’t staying to keep an eye on Nico. Part of you worries he’s going to fade in his sleep.
When it got late at night, and you were still sorting through the last pieces of paperwork, Nico flickered. It wasn’t just a trick of the light either. He looked like he was having a nightmare so you wondered over by the side of his bed. In the dim light, his face was contorted in raw agony. He was begging in quiet sobs, “Bianca, no . . .” You didn’t recognize the name. Something about the pain on his face made you feel like you were intruding, but a deeper part of you felt that you had to fix it somehow. You reached out to brush a bit of hair out of his face, but your hand passed right through. For a second you thought it must have been sleep deprivation playing trick on your brain. You were tired. That was all. Then, almost like blinking, he was gone. It happened so fast you almost didn’t register it. You laughed at yourself. This was crazy. You needed to get some sleep. Then it happened again, longer this time. Nico was just gone. It was safe to say you didn’t get much sleep.

In the morning light, those fears seemed so unreal, but Nico’s cold pulse was a grim reminder. He doesn’t feel alive and you’re not quite sure why. Chewing on the end of your pencil as you update medical records, you try and parse through it. It’s not just a Hades kid thing. You’ve shaken hands with Hazel, and you could feel life in her. There’s something wrong with Nico and you don’t know what that is, and it frustrates you just as much as it frightens you. You hate feeling powerless after all the work you put in. It’s not fair.

Lou comes to visit you and Kyla in the infirmary.

“Hi Nico,” she says, wondering right in through the front door, without even bothering to talk with the on duty nurse first. She knows where she’s going, and she’s here often enough to pass without suspicion.

“Oh, hi Lou Ellen.” He seems almost confused by her greeting as she waltzes past.

“You say hi to the patients before you say hi to your girlfriend? How cruel, Lulu,” Kyla teases, looking up from where she’s organizing different supplies.

“I was saving the best for last,” Lou replies smoothly, throwing her arms open for a hug. Kyla does one better, taking advantage of her outstanding height to pick Lou up by the waist and twirl them around Disney style. Lou giggles like a schoolgirl, as her feet touch the ground.

“Before you get literally swept away again, how about saying hello to your favorite son of Apollo?” you pipe up. Lou looks over her shoulder at you. She has that look in her eye.

“Sorry, you’re right. Hi, Austin.” She smiles wickedly.

“Ha.” Austin points and laughs at you while you pretend to be wounded.

“Alright, alright. I’m sorry for distracting you from your girlfriend. You may go back to canoodling now.” Lou rolls her eyes, but does in fact turn back to Kyla. You wonder over to Nico to take his mid-day pulse.

“How goes it, Nico?” you ask as you feel his wrist. He barely flinches when you touch him this time, though his body is as tense as always. Behind his pulse, you can practically feel a cavern. Still empty, you think angrily. At this rate, you’ll have to release him from the ward. If you don’t know what’s wrong, there’s nothing you can do and it’d be a waste to have him stay. “Nico?” you ask, as you realize he appears to be daydreaming.

“Huh? Sorry, what?” His cheeks are a bit red. You raise an eyebrow in silent question. His eyes flicker back over to Lou and Kyla.

“Ah,” you say, before turning their way. “Get a room!” you call. Kyla sticks her tongue out at you
while Lou presses a feather light kiss to her cheek. You just snort a laugh and shake your head, turning back to Nico. “Yeah, they’re kind of disgustingly cute.”

“How can they just . . .” He looks almost ashamed, hands fidgeting in his lap.

“What, be affectionate in public?” you fill in. Nico nods, looking down at his hands in his lap. “Well, Kyla has always been a show off.” You shrug. It never really occurred to you before they were kind of mushy in public, but you guess that’s just because most of your siblings tend to be show offs.

“Even though they’re . . .” Nico kind of makes a few really vague hand gestures that leave you no more elucidated than before.

“Is it the whole ‘all the gods are related’ thing?” you ask, because yeah. That was your first question when you saw a demigod couple being cuddly.

“What? No, not that.” He scowls at you like this confusion is somehow your fault. Which it’s not. You’re pretty sure it’s not any way. You like to think of yourself as a pretty perceptive dude. “It’s just . . . that they’re both . . .” He mumbles something you don’t quite catch.

“Come again?” You ask.

“You know . . .” Nico groans and looks up at you. “Girls,” he manages.

“What?”

“They’re both . . . girls. I mean . . .” For a second, your brain grinds to a halt. What the two of you had talked about earlier, about him being from the forties begins to set in. It never occurred to you that Nico might be . . . well. . .

“Yeah, they’re both girls. Do you have a problem with that?” you ask. Nico tenses, and looks away from you for a second.

“No . . .” He says “It’s just . . . strange.” You know you shouldn’t be angry with him for saying that, he doesn’t really know better considering he was raised in a time when killing someone because they were gay was an acceptable thing, and you should just calmly explain things, but one is your sister and the other is your best friend, and you’ll be damned if you let anyone call them ‘strange’.

“What’s so strange about it?” You cross your arms over your chest, eyes leveling a half glare. However, Nico’s not looking at you, he’s watching the girls again, face more pensive than perturbed.

“They’re so . . . open.” He shakes his head, looking back at his hands in his lap. “How could they be so brave?” You are almost sure you aren’t supposed to hear that last part. All of that anger melts right out of you, as you take a seat beside his bed.

“I can’t really pretend to know what it was like way back when,” you begin, drawing Nico’s attention away from his hands, ”but I guarantee it’s different now. People don’t really care so much about that kind of stuff, especially not here.” Nico’s shoulders tense, and he looks at you warily.

“What do you mean by that?” he asks, and you can tell it’s a loaded question. Still, you can only really answer it as honestly as you can.

“We’ve all got more important things to worry about, you know? It’s not really a thing.” You can tell by the way Nico’s still kind of glaring that he doesn’t believe you. “Like, so you know my cabin right? Most of us are some kind of gay. Bi, pan, plain old homo, you name it.” Nico’s disbelief turns into confusion. You’re not quite sure what part of that confuses him so you resolve to just continue
on with your example and hope it works itself out later. “Finding a completely straight Apollo kid is like finding a needle in a haystack. But like, judging from the look on your face that's news to you right? I mean how many kids at camp know Apollo cabin as the gay cabin? We’re archers and doctors and rock stars.” Nico snorts at that, which you take as a good thing. “And plus, there are a ton of gay Greek heroes. You’re heard of Achilles and Patroclus right?”


“I know you’re old but—”

“Shut up Solace.” Nico’s face is bright red. “I meant I met his ghost. At the river Styx. He...” Nico pauses, swallowing past a lump in his throat “He gave Percy and I a lecture about being dipped in the river. He didn’t really seem... Well, you know... He’s one of the most notorious heroes in Greek Mythology.”

“And one of the gayest,” you say with a shrug. Then an idea comes to you. “Actually, you know there’s a great book about them—”

“Here we go,” Austin says as he passes by the bed, rolling his eyes. You glare at him.

“Shut up, Austin.” There’s a slight blush on your cheeks.

“What was that quote you always used to say?” Kyla murmurs, tapping her chin.

“Which one?” Lou replies with a giggle. You wonder just when they started listening in on your conversation.

“‘I would know him in death,’” Austin supplies, and the girls giggle.

“‘There are no bargains between lions and men. I will kill you and eat you raw,’” Lou intones in what you suppose is supposed to be a mockery of your voice.

“‘You can use a spear as a walking stick, but that doesn’t change its nature,’” Kyla says.

“Guys, stop it.” Try as you might, the rest of your siblings seem to be having too good a time to listen to your pleas.

“‘This and this and this,’” Lou practically sings it.

“‘We were gods at the dawning of the world,’” Kyla’s voice alone is a song.

“‘What has hector ever done to me?’” Austin says. The girls murmur and nod their heads. It’s quiet for a few moments, and you realize that they’ve all run out of quotes. You thank the gods.

“Oh!” You spoke too soon. Lou snaps her fingers, a smile on her face. “‘Name one hero who was happy.’”

“‘You can’t,’” Kyla supplies.

“Alright, would guys cut it out?” You huff, taking a quick look at Nico. He just has that confused look again. You really need to stop making a habit out of throwing Nico for a loop. It’s not exactly the most of sound of medical or flirting practices.

“What were you all quoting?” he asks.

“If you can’t tell Will’s a little obsessed with it.” Lou stage whispers.

“Am not!”

“Are too.”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“I swear to gods Lou, I will come back there and tickle you until you pee yourself if you don’t cut it out.” You wave a threatening finger at her.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she says, though she looks anything but certain.

“Try me.” It’s quiet for a few moments before she speaks.

“‘He is half my soul, as the poets say.’”

“I’m serious.”

“Philtatos, most beloved.” You practically gasp.

“Lou Ellen-”

“‘Pat-ro-clus,’” she says.

Your face is bright red as you leap up from Nico’s side to chase her around the room. Stupid fast girl, you think as she dashes around, always just a few inches out of reach. You can’t believe that they said all of that stuff in front of Nico of all people. It doesn’t occur to you that none of them really understand that Nico kind of reminds you of Patroclus. They don’t know that you used to daydream about being able to call someone your philtatos. They don’t know that you ache for someone saying your name like Achilles says Patroclus. A dream on the lips, and a prophecy to the ear. They probably think you’re embarrassed about liking the book so much and not about what a hopeless romantic you are.

“Get back here!” You yell as she leaps over one of the empty beds in a single bound. In the background you can hear Kyla and Austin laughing hysterically. “This isn’t funny you assholes!” Out of the corner of your eye you see Nico snickering, and trying his hardest to hide it behind his hand. It sends a jolt through you, propelling you forward and moving your body faster. For a moment, you think you’ve caught Lou, but your fingers only close around air as she laughs. You drudge up every curse you know as you catch your breath.

“Tired already?” she asks, laughing. Surreptitiously, you slip your sandals off so it’s easier for you to run.

“Not a chance.” You spring forward with much more grace than you exhibited earlier. This time, Lou’s not quite fast enough and you just manage to grab her leg. You both crash to the ground. There’s a brief scuffle, during which you get a foot to the face, and then you’ve got Lou pinned to the ground face down.


“No.” You climb to your feet with a light smile, all earlier mischief forgotten.
“Should we just . . .” He looks profoundly uncomfortable standing in the doorway. For a second, you think it’s just him. Then you notice there’s a girl standing just a little way behind him. It takes you a second to remember her name.

“Just make sure you sign into the guest book. It’s on the desk next to the door,” you say. Jason nods and walks over.

“Thank you,” Piper says with a brilliant smile. You think she’s his girlfriend, but you don’t really remember.

“No problem.” You say. Leave, you think. You watch as they move to Nico’s side. Whatever they’re saying is going in one ear and out the other, as each little movement of Nico’s catches your eye. He’s not as tense when they stand next to him as he is when you do. His eyes don’t narrow suspiciously, and he doesn’t look bewildered either. Something sick settles in your stomach as you watch Jason ruffle Nico’s hair, and how playfully Nico swats the hand away. It’s like Jason’s touch hardly bothers him. It’s not fair.

“Oi, earth to Will,” Lou snaps her fingers in front of your eyes. You snap around, to look at her. For a second, her playful expression falters. “You alright?” she asks.

“Fine,” you say. You know she isn’t fooled.

“So, how’s it going with Nico?” she asks in a tone much too polite to be authentic. For a second, you look over your shoulder. Piper is talking animatedly with her hands, all brilliant smiles while Jason stands next to her nodding along. You’re too far away for them to hear you. Besides, they’re too busy to pay you much attention.

“Difficult,” you say. She looks surprised by that, but she doesn’t prod. She knows that you’ll fill her in if she waits long enough. “I mean . . .” Your words stick in your throat as all of your frustration come to a boil. Before you can stop and think about what you’re really saying, you’re speaking. “He’s just so dense. I mean seriously. It drives me crazy sometimes. Not just in a ‘oh I think I’m so cute and vintage ‘cause I’m from the forties’ kind of way, but in his aura even. He’s constructed some kind impenetrable gloom that he just sits around in. All he ever does is sit on that bed moping, stuck in his own little world, not paying attention to anything else, or to the people around him. Then he has the gall to blame his problems on others not liking him, it’s just so stupid. And then here a bunch of people show up to just shower him with attention, and he just laps it up while he still acts like such a brooding little-”

There is a crack of flesh against flesh and then there is silence. You touch a hand to your cheek as the pain of it finally hits you. Head reeling, you turn to look at Lou. “What the Hades-”

“William Solace.” Her voice is dangerously low, and something about it reminds you that Hecate is a goddess of shadows. “Don’t you dare talk like that again.”

“I don’t . . .” The venom in her voice stuns you. In all your time as friends, you can’t quite remember ever seeing Lou Ellen so angry. Her hand curls into a fist, held so tightly at her side, you worry that she might just hit you again.

“I think you need to take a break,” she says, after a few seconds of tense silence. She doesn’t wait for you to follow, but you do.

Outside, the noonday sun is hot. It feels strange being surrounded by the bustle of camp. A gaggle of campers run past you on their way to the canoe lake.
“Alright, so what’s so important that you-” The force of her second slap nearly gives you whiplash.

“How can you be so flip about this?” she asks, staring at you like you’d grown a second head. You rub your cheek with your hand.

“I don’t know-”

“What do you mean, you don’t know. Will listen to yourself!” She shakes her head. “You’re a doctor Will, how could you say those things about Nico?”

“But-”

“Don’t you ‘but’ me, mister. Will, you were acting like a monster.” The hurt in her voices takes you aback.

“I . . .” Your hand drops from your face, and you think for a few seconds. Lou continues to talk.

“Aren’t you the one who always says that the biggest threat to a demigod is a broken heart? I don’t know what exactly Nico’s been through, but I’ve heard rumors Will. If half of them are even half true, I can’t imagine how Nico’s managed to make it this far. So yeah, he’s withdrawn and jaded and he doesn’t trust people, but could you?” She glares at you for only a second more before sighing. “This is so unlike you Will. What’s gotten a hold of you?” Again, you open your mouth to speak, to justify your actions.

We can become fixated on people who are little more than strangers

The words come back to you, as they have so often in the last few days,

    Fixated

    Possessive and jealous

    Possessive and jealous

    He glorified it as a sign of victory

    Possessive and jealous

    Possessive and jealous

“Fixated,” you mumble to yourself. Lou’s look of scorn, twists quickly into one of concern.

“Will?” Under the midday sun you put your head in your hands, and fall to the ground.

“I fucked up,” you say into your hands, groaning under the weight of your faults. “Lou, I fucked up so bad.” You hear, rather than see, Lou take a seat beside you. After a few seconds you feel her fluffy brown hair rub against the side of your face as she lolls her head onto your shoulder.

“It’s okay Will, just-“
“No it’s not.” You take your hands away from your face.

“Will-” She sits up a bit.

“Lou, I can’t believe I said all that stuff.” Your voice is strained.

“Will-”

“What is wrong with me? Oh my gods I-”

“Will-”

“I mean, me, I can’t-”

“WILLIAM SOLACE.” Lou grabs a hold of your shoulders and shakes you a few times. “WOULD YOU CLOSE YOUR GOSH DARNED MOUTH FOR FIVE SECONDS?” Her voice rings so loud across the greens that one or two of the campers stop what they’re doing to stare. You blink back at her while she catches her breath. “Geez. I can’t believe you made me shout like that.”

“Me neither,” you say. She does not look like she appreciates your sass.

“Alright, I’ve had it up to here with all of your self-obsessed nonsense. This is not about you Will. Yes, you messed up. Instead of throwing a pity party about it, you are going to thoroughly research mental illness and how to handle traumatic stress. Then you are going to go over to Nico and apologize. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” And you do, you really do. Lou releases a breath and then falls back into the grass.

“Boy that took a lot out of me,” she sighs. ”And it’s so hot outside too. I feel like I’m melting.”

“Aren’t you a southern belle or something? Shouldn’t you be used to this heat?” You say. Lou smiles at you.

“I’m a Georgia peach. We are very delicate.”

“Says the girl who once put Cecil in a half nelson for taking one of her ginger snaps,” you say with a roll of your eyes. Lou is quiet for a moment, looking up at the sky.

“That’s better,” she says quietly. “Back to normal.”

“Think so?” You smile just a little bit.

“I…” Her voice catches in her throat.

“Lou?”

“The air feels kind of thick,” she says as she reaches a hand up to the sky, opening and closing it a few times. You have no idea what she means by that. It’s as clear a day as you’ve ever seen.

“Lou, are you okay?” Whatever trance she was in, she snaps out of it.

“Sorry. Been a long few days. I’m tired, that’s all.” You feel like your hair is standing on end.

“Have you been dreaming recently?” you ask. She shrugs and closes her eyes.

“Nothing prophetic or anything. After all, Apollo’s gift is on the lockdown right?”
“Yeah.” That’s not really an answer, but you don’t think you’ll get a more substantial one. You sit there for a few seconds, before climbing to your feet and heading inside. Jason and Piper are still sitting next to Nico, chatting away. On his bedside table, you can see that his old book had been replaced with a new one. One with a blue cover and gold helmet on the cover. You stop dead in your tracks. You look at Nico, but he’s paying too much attention to Jason right now to notice you. A sick feeling settles in your stomach, but you quickly reprimand yourself. You shouldn’t think like that. Nico deserves to be happy, even if you’re not the one to make him happy. You see Kyla slaving away with the new supplies, and you remember Lou, sitting in the grass outside.

“Hey Kyla,” you call lightly. She turns to you with barely concealed worry.

“Yeah?” she asks.

“Your girlfriend’s taking a nap out in the grass, you might want to make sure she doesn’t burn to a crisp.” You hook a thumb over your shoulder. Kyla waits for a few seconds, and you smile lightly at her. “Don’t worry about the new supplies. I’ll put them away. I have some reading to do anyway.” She watches you for a second before getting to her feet.

“You work too hard,” she says as she brushes past you. You shrug.

“I’ve still got a lot to learn.” She looks over her shoulder just to roll her eyes at you.

“Take care Nico,” Kyla says, waving a light hand. Nico nods to her as she leaves. For a second, his head turns towards you, and you lock eyes. He gives you a tiny, reassuring, smile, and that reminds you of the way you were acting earlier. You are the first to look away. Yes, you still have a lot to learn.

. . .

. . .Individuals may feel stressed or frightened even when they’re no longer in danger. In addition, experiencing trauma as a child makes the individual more susceptible to future trauma. The fundamental sense of fear and helplessness . . .

“Hey, Will?” You start as you look up from your book. There’s a tinge in your neck and you try to rub it out. Great. You think you pulled something.

“Yeah Austin?”

“I’m heading back to the cabin.”

“Oh, cool.”

“You should too.”

“I will, just finishing up.” Austin pauses. The ebony of his skin makes him seem like a show in the low light of the infirmary.

“I know there’s been a lot of work recently, but it’s not as crazy now. You should spend a night in your own bed. Plus, the rest of us miss you and the younger kids need their counselor.” You blink up
at Austin, eyes wide. It never really occurred to you how honest Austin could be when he wasn’t speaking in a series of weird poetic references.

“Oh.”

“Is that news to you?” he scoffs, like it should have been the most obvious thing in the world.

“No, I mean, I know I should go home, but . . . I mean . . .” You look from your desk to Nico’s bed. He’s reading quietly. The lamp on his bedside table is a little orange oasis in a sea of sleeping shadows. All the beds around him are empty.

“This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong, to love that well which thou must leave ere long.” Austin’s brow is furrowed.

“Shakespeare?” you ask. He nods, and then shakes his head.

“It doesn’t quite work. The sonnet is about dying. But you would be taking leave of death in this case.” A little frown perches on his lips.

“It fits pretty well, knowing that I have be true now because I’ll be leaving soon.” In fact, you think the poem fits a little too well. After all, you were going to go apologize to Nico before leaving for the night.

“To depart from death is to live, yet this life is being equated to death. It’s too much like Eliot.” His frown deepens. “I should have just used Eliot in the first place.”

“Hey, everyone has an off day,” you try, though you’re not quite sure why he’s so bothered. Austin just shakes his head.

“I’ll see you back at the cabin.” And with that he leaves. The sound of the door shutting brings Nico out of his world. He looks around a bit bewildered, as if he hadn’t noticed how late it was. For a second, he looks your way. You rest your head against one of your hands and wave lazily.

“Hey, Nico,” you say quietly. He ducks his head back behind the book. Well, you decide that it’s now or never. You try to be as nonchalant about this as possible, taking a seat by this bed. “Time to check your pulse.” He sets the book down, and you gently take his wrist. He still jumps at the contact. His pulse is as cold as the dead’s. You have to let his hand go. Nothing’s changed.

With a sigh you prop one leg on the edge of your chair and tuck your knee underneath your chin.

“How are you feeling?” You ask. Nico shrugs.

“The same,” he says.

“Yeah but . . . How does ‘the same’ feel?”

“I don’t know, it just feels normal.” You decide it’s best to just drop the subject. The last thing you want to do is make him angry before you have to give your apology. Your eyes close for a second, and the momentary darkness radiates almost like a shockwave through your body. All your muscles seem to relax and beg you to go to sleep. You really are tired.

To wake yourself up you put your feet back on the floor and sit up a little. Everything has to be perfect. You have to be focused.

“Hey, I uh . . .” Despite how often you thought about all of this, you can’t quite seem to form the
words right. “I wanted to apologize.” Nico looks at you like nothing you say makes sense.

“Apolo...
"You are." Nico scowls at you. With an inward groan, you try and phrase things in a way that won’t make you an ass again.

"No, it’s just that . . . I mean . . . What do you think of Jason?" He looks at you strangely for a couple of seconds, before his face falls. You think he looks disappointed.

"He’s a good guy." Nico brings his knees up to his chest and folds his arms over them. “I used to kind of resent him, but . . . he’s been there for me during some real low points.” Nico doesn’t look at you. “He’s a good guy.”

"Doesn’t he have a girlfriend though?"

"Uh, yeah." Nico turns to you.

"Okay, just checking to see if you knew,” you say, fidgeting nervously. Nico looks at you, really looks at your for a second.

"You’re worried I like Jason.” It’s not a question.

"Look, I’m not going to tell you who you should and shouldn’t like, but I mean, he has a girlfriend, and well, that doesn’t mean that he’s totally straight you know, but he’s in a relationship, and I just don’t want you pining after some unobtainable hero type while he’s in the middle of his own love story running around saving the world, completely obviously to your heartbreak. You deserve better than that and plus he’s—" You cut your rambling short in a fit of shock that nearly stops your heart.

Nico starts laughing. Not just a light giggle, but a real, full, hysterical laugh. His book slides off the bed, and you lunge to catch it. Nico doesn’t even notice, he’s just clutching his stomach, nearly keeling over from laughter.

"Oh man," he says after he sobers up a bit “Where were you when I had my crush on Percy?" Your world grinds to a halt for a second.

"Percy?” And you can’t quite believe it, because, while yeah Percy is like the camp’s biggest hero, he’s also just so . . . Percy.

"Not anymore,” He amends quickly, and then his face gets bright red. “I can’t believe I told you that.”

“I can’t believe you had a crush on Percy Jackson.” You say, shaking your head. “I mean, he’s really funny and he’s built like a walking swimsuit advertisement, and no offense to Annabeth, but the guy is a few cards short of a full deck.”

“I guess I have a thing for idiots,” He says derisively.

“Hey, I’m not that big of an idiot.” You smile cheekily. Nico flushes bright red and sputters incoherently.

“Shut up, Solace! I-I wasn’t talking about you!” he insists, “Give me my book back.” You hold it up as he snatches it from your fingers.

“Well, romantic interest aside, why is Jason recommending you gay love stories?” you ask. Nico’s still a little red, but he sighs.

“I’m pretty sure it’s his ways of ‘supporting’ me or whatever. I don’t really like to talk about the whole thing so he keeps giving me all of these books instead.” Nico fiddles with flaps on the book. You change your mind about Wonder Boy. Maybe he’s not so bad after all.
“Well, he’s got pretty good taste in books if he recommended that.” You tap the cover lightly, getting to your feet.

“Where are you going?” Nico asks, as you walk towards the door.


“Oh,” he says. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight Nico.”

The last thing you see, as you close the door behind you, is Nico reaching towards the lamp, his only light in a sea of perched shadows.

Chapter End Notes

The next three paragraphs are just my thoughts about things. I have a few updated related comments in the very last paragraph, so feel free to skip this bit if you don’t really want to read my notes. They’re like footnote in a book, except with less formal language and shit.

The Italian says "Why are you always so happy to see me?" or something to that effect. Hopefully.

I spent twenty minutes trying to decide if Patroclus and Achilles or Achilles and Patroclus sounded better. In the end I had to flip a coin. Anyway, can you tell I’m a little obsessed with The Song of Achilles? Seriously though, that book is so good. Also I think Will Solace probably really feels that book. Like, based on the mythology I’ve kind of crafted, Achilles shares a lot of characteristics with the Apollo kids. Will can probably see himself in Achilles. On the other hand, Patroclus is a doctor, and is abhorred by the mechanisms of war and is constantly fighting to protect those precious to him. On that level, Will probably felt like Patroclus was speaking from his own heart. I feel like Will’d have a really profound and kind of twisted connection to that story, one like Moteta and Mnemosyne, from Keat’s Hyperion. It’s a warning and a memory, and the atavistic spring of inspiration.

Also I felt like I should address Nico’s historical background. Nico grew up in an Italy swiftly moving towards fascism, and an America that was dealing with a ‘crisis of masculinity’. Around 1900-1920 homosexuality was an open thing that people weren’t all that worried about. However as the middle class began ‘losing’ their positions to women and men were increasingly being labeled ‘less manly’ for not working with their hands, homosexuality began to be stigmatized. Starting a concept of ‘heterosexuality’ was created and enforced as the norm. By the 1950s homosexuality was considered a perversion and a national security risk. This is all in America by the way. In Italy the stigmatization happened much faster as fascist rule began to take hold. Anything considered ‘other’ would need to be suppressed in favor of a culture that functioned as a single unit.

I feel like when Nico came from this sort of environment, right into a modern day, military school that he would have, without realizing it, absorbed the worst parts of modern attitudes towards homosexuality. He probably became normalized to all kinds of
homosexual slurs really fast and just internalized that being gay was to be weak and to be inferior. Anyway I felt like that needed discussion. I really feel like there was not enough discussion of Nico and Bianca’s culture shock in the books. The late 1930s/early 1940s and the 21st century are crazy different eras. I mean, I know they were little kids when they went into the hotel, but damn. That’s a huge stretch of time. Like the difference between Casa Blanka and Avatar.

Alright, news time. I’m sorry this chapter took so long, but I fear the next chapter will take even longer. I’m in college right now, and it’s nearing the end of the semester, which means I have a shit ton of work for finals to do. The next chapter will probably not get posted until my winter break starts. Sorry about that. On the bright side (or maybe not, IDK how you guys feel about the length) the next chapter is going to be a lot longer than this one, probably and is going to involve a really great passage by Reyna that I am really excited to show you guys. So look forward to that. Or dread it. Maybe all my readers look at this just to scowl and mumble to themselves, who know
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

I HAVE HAD THE WORST WRITERS BLOCK FOR A WHOLE. FREAKING. MONTH. I Couldn’t WRITE A DAMN THING WORTH KEEPING UNTIL TONIGHT

GUESS WHO’S BEEN WRITING FOR SIX HOURS STRAIGHT? THIS GIRL. WRITER’S BLOCK CAN EAT MY ENTIRE ASS.

This chapter's main themes are "why, why would you do that?" and "I hate my family" and "Sex. But not like fun and steamy sex. Mostly just awkward talking about sex." Enjoy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something . . . something something something. There is something you are missing. There is something you are forgetting. Something something something . . . something something . . . You will miss this. You will forget this . . . something something . . . What was it? How did it go? You knew once . . . Something some something . . . It was . . . It was brilliant . . . Don’t forget this . . . Something something something . . . Already it’s fading . . . words words words . . . Don’t forget this . . . something, something shriek’d . . . from all his limbs Celestial-

“WAKE UP!”

You wake up screaming, pieces of your dream evaporating as you tumble out of bed. Something small and also screaming tumbles down with you. As you try and orientate yourself, the first things that come to you are the familiar sounds of Apollo cabin. Someone’s speakers are blasting Taylor Swift’s new album on a loop, Jamie-Lyn and Devereux are fighting over something stupid, Victoria is loudly regaling a few of the younger kids with a story about the time she fought off a dracaena with only a banana, Chloe seems to be systematically tearing apart the cabin and of course, the remaining half dozen or so seem to be snickering at you. By the time you untangle yourself from your sheets and what you now recognize as one of your little sisters, you don’t even remember having a dream in the first place. Besides, you have more important things to worry about, namely a crying little sister.

“Shh, Nissa, it’s alright. It’s alright.” You pat her head once or twice, and that’s all it takes to make the tears dry up.
“It’s not my fault.” Nissa pouts, rubbing a tinny little fist into her eye. “Kyla and Austin told me to wake you up.” You look up from your spot on the floor to see the two of them whistling and studying cabin’s ceiling.

“Hey, you two,” you snap, “future counselors do not use the little ones to harass current counselors.”

“Current counselors don’t sleep their life away while the rest of us get on with our lives,” Kyla snaps back.

“You make it sound like I slept in till noon or something.” You yawn, shuffling Nissa to the side while you get to your feet.

“Well,” Kyla says, sticking her head out the nearest window and looking up at the sky, “it’s pretty close.” You balk, shaking your head.

“No way, it can’t be past nine.”

“It’s eleven thirty.” One of your other siblings checks their watch as they organize their things.

“Eleven thirty?!” You repeat with a rather obvious mixture of shock, disbelief and panic. “Why did you let me sleep in so long?” Without truly waiting for an answer you scramble to your feet, tearing off your pajamas and slipping on your pants.

 “[To] Save [you] from curious Conscience, that still lords its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole,” Austin replies, his arms crossed over his chest. “Killing care, and grief of dark.”

“I don’t need more sleep than anyone else.” You arm gets caught in your shirt as you try to get it over your head. Stupid thing, you swear you . . . oh wait that’s one of Kyla’s shirts. You’re about to ask her why her clothes are on the section of floor that you always throw your clothes on when your two loudest brothers interrupt you.

“Will, Jamie won’t give me my shirt back!” Devereux shouts across the room.

“It’s my shirt!” Jamie insists. You sigh.
“If the shirt in question is one of literally dozens of identical camp shirts, I’m going to make you two give the Aphrodite cabin archery lessons.” There’s a beat of silence.

“You know what, who cares.”

“Yeah, it’s just a shirt.” You thank the gods that the Aphrodite cabin makes such a convenient scapegoat. Honestly, Drew Tanaka is a mean shot, and Mitchell’s not bad, but hey, if it ends their fighting that works for you.

“The problem, you stubborn ass, is that you haven’t been getting enough sleep.” Kyla jabs your side while you’re still shirt blind, drawing your attention back to the more obvious problem at hand.

“I have been getting plenty of sleep.” Now you’re struggling to get the stupid thing off. At least Kyla has enough tact to not tease you about it.

“What is it, after all, but something missed?” Austin helps you tug your shirt off, freeing you from your cottony prison. You throw it towards Kyla’s side of the room, and hope it lands with the rest of her stuff. Then you go back to shifting through your stuff.

“Alright, alright, fine. You win.” Is this clean? Probably. You hope so. You’re pretty sure that’s your clean pile. You smell it just to make sure, and oh nope. That was not your clean pile. “Thank you for making me get some extra sleep, but it’s almost lunch time, and I need to run to the infirmary before that to-”

“Will, have you seen my bow?” Chloe calls.

“How did you lose your bow?” You turn away from Austin and Kyla for just long enough to remember why you hate your siblings sometimes.

“It’s not lost, I just can’t find it,” she insists from on top of a bookshelf. You seriously wonder why she thinks that would help her find her bow.

“Did you check under your bed?” you ask. Chloe perches for a second, head resting on her fist as she weighs that possibility. Then she leaps from the bookshelf, feet knocking Victoria on the head
before Chloe breaks her fall with a roll that takes her straight underneath her bed.

“Found it!” comes the muffled call. You roll your eyes, and just settle for wearing your scrubs.

“What the blistering bleeding fuck?” Victoria bites out, rubbing the back of her head.

“Language,” Kyla chides.

“I’ve got to go,” you say before you can get dragged into anymore of your siblings’ shenanigans. You almost make it to the door, sandals in hand. Then Milo attaches himself to one of your legs and Nissa follows suit.

“Where’re you going?” Milo asks, looking up at you with big puppy dog eyes.

“I need to swing by the infirmary before lunch,” you say, trying to dislodge your younger siblings as gently as possible.

“You’re always at the infirmary!” Nissa whines and holds tighter. It’s only been three days, you think.

“I’m looking after a very special hero. It’s important that he has someone watching over him, to make sure his condition doesn’t worsen,” you say as soothingly as possible, but truth be told you are fast losing your patience.

“That’s not fair!” she cries and then buries her face in your pants.

“I know, but-”

“Whoever this person is, I hate him,” Nissa says firmly. Alright, play time’s over. You begin to pry your siblings away in earnest.

“His name is Nico, and no you shouldn’t hate him. It’s not his fault, a lot of heroes get badly hurt and it takes them a long time to heal. I’m a doctor, it’s my job to take care of them.” Trying to free yourself from them feels like trying to fight pry off tar.
“But you’re our brother,” Milo insists.

“Well, I don’t really want to be his brother, so—”

“So you’ll do archery practice with us today?” Nissa interjects, and wow you really don’t know how she managed to get archery practice out that.

“I’ll do it tomorrow, promise.”

“Today!”

“Tomorrow.” That seems to be enough for Milo, because he lets you pry him off and set him on the ground. Nissa still holds firm.

“Today.”


“NEVER!” You wonder vaguely if cutting off your leg to escape would be worth it. The Hephaestus kids could probably build you an awesome robot leg. It would take a while, though. And there’s no way you could outrun Nissa with only one leg.

“Allright, fine. If you're going to be stubborn you’re coming with me.” Nissa’s not heavy; she’s probably the tiniest six-year-old you’ve ever seen. Still, it’s a little difficult to hobble around with a child attached to your leg. You manage to make it half way across the green before you’re about ready to toss Nissa into the canoe lake.

“Hey, Will!” From the steps of the Poseidon cabin you spot a familiar head of dark hair coming your way. That gives you an idea. “I have a question for you,” he says as he’s just within range.

“Percy, perfect timing, catch!” It happens so fast that Nissa doesn’t have a chance to outmaneuver you. One second she’s clinging loosely to your pant leg, the next you’ve tossed her through the air at
“What the-” He drops his pen just in time to catch her, looking more than a little bewildered.

“Thanks man I owe you one,” you say. Nissa blinks, still more than a little shocked that you threw her at Percy. Percy just blinks back, equally shocked that you threw a small child at him. For a moment you remember what Nico said about once having a crush on Percy and you almost laugh. It’s not that he’s not hot; oh no he is definitely hot. He’s just so . . . You shake your head. “You had a question?” you remind him. Percy snaps out of his daze, then scrunches his face up in thought.

“I forgot,” he says after a second. You shrug.

“Well, if you remember I’ll be in the infirmary. Get Nissa to arts and crafts after lunch, thanks a million!” you call, sprinting away before Percy has the chance to protest. By the time you reach the door to the infirmary, you’re a bit out of breath and sweating a little. You straighten up, adjusting your scrubs and fixing your hair before you set yourself in front of the door. This is the last day that Nico’s going to be in the infirmary. You take a breath, once, twice, then open the door. It barely slips shut behind you before there’s something hurdling towards your head.

“What the Hades, Solace?” you duck, something hard thumping against the door before you can catch it.

“I think that should be my line. After all, I’m the one getting things thrown at them first thing in the morning,” you say as you examine the projectile. “Hey, wait a minute . . .” Now you’re no Athena kid, but even so it kind of hurts you to know that Nico was throwing a book, particularly your very favorite book.


“I don’t know Nico, I figured that Patroclus and Achilles dying in the end was kind of a given, considering you’ve already met Achilles’ ghost.” He sputters, and now you notice that Nico’s face is bright red.

“Not that, I mean . . .” His hands wave around as he talks, gesturing at the air like the answer might be suspended there. You frown, open the book, and skim around a bit. Oh, you think after a second, and part of you wants to laugh, the other part feels kind of guilty you forgot to warn him.
“Oh right, I forgot about the sex parts.” You casually shut the book and take your seat at Nico’s bedside. Nico groans and sits back in bed, his hands covering his face.

“How does something like that just slip your mind?” His hands muffle his voice. You make an ‘I don’t know’ noise and shrug.

“Not all of us have super delicate nineteen forties mentalities.” You meant for the jab to be just a little tease, but Nico seems to take it personally.

“I’m not delicate,” he snaps, hands dropping from his face and clenching into fists. Then, almost as fast, the blush returns to his face “It’s just, they . . . I mean . . .”

“No, it was my bad. I get it,” you say, and Nico looks over at you. He looks surprised, and you try not to feel offended, but you’re not that successful. Regardless, you do your best to brush that aside.

“Did you finish reading it?” you ask. Nico turns a more brilliant shade of red, turning his head away. Then he looks at you out of the corner of his eyes and mumbles a quiet, “Yes.” Something in you feels fit to burst.

“Did, you like it? Was it good? Wasn’t the ending so sad, but also really fulfilling? And that foreshadowing, I mean the first time I read the line ‘What has Hector ever done to me?’ I had to set the book down and walk around for a few minutes. Did you like Odysseus? I kind of hated him at first, but then he turned out to be an alright guy. You know who was really just the absolute worst? Agamemnon.” You prattle on as Nico begins to shrink back from your barrage of questions.

“Will, hide me!” For a second, you’re not entirely sure what’s happening. One second, you’re sitting by Nico’s side, your fangirl side barely restrained, the next Cecil has appeared in front of you, eyes wide in panic.

“Cecil what did you do?” you ask, even as you get to your feet and begin looking for somewhere to hide him. Part of you is frustrated by just how second nature this is to you.

“I may have changed out Miranda Gardiner’s shampoo for magical hair dye,” he says, smiling nervously. You swear, jumping up to the infirmary door and locking it. There is terrible crash not seconds later. From deep within the bowls of the Big House a shout erupts.

“CCCCCCCCCEEEEEEECCCCCCCCCCCCIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIL!!!!” You watch the color drain out of his face.
“Gee, anything else you want to fill me in on while you’re still breathing?” you say sarcastically, back pressed firmly against the door. This day has been a disaster and it’s not even noon yet.

“I also set the Demeter cabin on fire . . . again,” he mutters. There’s another crash. Miranda will be here soon, you know she will. Part of you is very tempted to just let her kill him.

“Why, why would you do that?” you ask, even as an idea creeps into your head.

“It was an accident!”

“Under the bed now.” You point at Nico’s bed. It’s occupant squawks indignantly, but Cecil is diving underneath before Nico has a chance to properly protest. The bed sheets just barely touch the floor. As long as Cecil doesn’t move, he should be safe. You mouth a quick, please at Nico, before unlocking the door, and dashing over to your desk. As you sit down, leafing through the books, you feel your pulse hammering in your ears.

There’s a cracking sound as the door bursts open and slams against the wall. Prepared as you were, the sound still makes you jump out of your skin. When you look at her, you almost laugh. Her hair looks like the fairies from Sleeping Beauty had a fight. Sunrise pink and cotton candy blue are twirled together, little hits of her original brown still poking out here and there. Still, you’re smart enough to keep that thought to yourself.

“Miranda what-”

“Cecil is the one that did this!” Her fists are clenched so tightly that you’re worried her nails will make her palm bleed. “Where is he?” The idea of just telling her flashes through your head once again, but instead you just shake your head.

“I haven’t seen him yet, I only woke up like half an hour ago,” you say.

“He ran into the Big House, I know he’s here somewhere!” She stomps her foot, and vines break through the infirmary floor.

“Ah, hey!” You put your hands out, trying your best to calm her. “You can look around if you want.
He might have gotten here before me.” Miranda eyes you wearily, and you can feel sweat begin to bead on your forehead. Your smile falters just a tiny bit.

“Alright,” she says. You fight the urge to collapse into your desk chair. Now it’s just a waiting game. If she finds Cecil, you’re guaranteed to lose your head as well. But, if she doesn’t then Cecil owes you one.

Miranda stalks around the room, opening cabinets and looking under beds. She leaves no stone unturned as she scours your hospital. However, as she comes near Nico’s bed, there’s a clear falter in her steps. Nico holds his book in front of his face. He hasn’t turned a page in nearly seven minutes, so you’re sure he’s not really reading. Still, Miranda turns around and gives Nico’s bed a wide berth. While she’s somewhere in the back of the room, you try to catch Nico’s eye. After a second he lowers his book. You mouth ‘thank you’ and give him a thumbs-up. He just rolls his eyes at you and goes back to pretending to read.

“Ugh, I can’t find him!” she wails at last. “I was so sure . . .” There’s a brief second where she looks over at Nico’s bed. Your heart nearly stops. “Never mind. Sorry about your infirmary, Will.” You shrug, a nervous smile on your face.

“Don’t worry about it.” You wave your hands as if to dismiss the thought. She gives Nico’s bed one more look before turning her back and heading towards the door. At the door she stops just long enough to look over her shoulder, and give you one last parting word.

“Next time you see Cecil, tell him to watch his back. Capture the flag is in four days, and you can bet that Demeter cabin will be out for blood.”

“I’ll make sure he knows,” you say. With a vicious smile she’s off. You walk over to the bed, crouching down and lifting up the edge. “Did you get all that?” Cecil is clearly still as pale as a ghost, but there’s a smile on his face.

“Loud and clear,” he says crawling out from under the bed with more grace than should be affronted most people. You stick your hand out to him and help him to his feet. “Hermes is going to get screwed if she’s still angry by capture the flag.” You can’t argue with that. “Can we still count on Apollo?” he asks, with that look that tells you he thinks he knows your answer.

“Only if you agree to rebuild the Demeter cabin,” you say and Cecil groans.
“Where am I supposed to get all that grass?” he asks. You give him a deadpanned stare.

“Cecil man, I love you but you are as dumb as a bag of bricks. Camp Half-blood is literally surrounded by a fucking field.” From behind, you swear you heard a snort of laughter, but when you look around Cecil, Nico still has his nose shoved in his book.

“Okay but this is different.” Cecil catches your look, and frowns. You roll your eyes. I am paying attention. “How am I supposed to collect it? Where am I going to put all that grass?”

“You once stole the lava from the rock wall. I don’t think the grass will give you that much trouble.” You peek around Cecil again. Oh you totally caught him looking that time. Nico's ears are red. That’s kind of cute.

“But that was different.” This time Cecil snaps in your face, drawing your attention away. Yeah, well this is important too. Still, you turn your eyes back to Cecil just so he knows you’re paying attention.

“If you don’t at least try to make amends, it’ll be you against the entire camp, minus Apollo cabin. Hermes will get slaughtered. The Stolls will know exactly who’s to blame.” You jab him in the chest.

“Hermes will be fine.” He waves a dismissive hand in front of your face. Why is everyone you know so frustrating today?

“Athena’s going to be against you. And if Athena’s going to be against you, that means Percy’s and the rest of all the prophecy kids still here will be against you. Aphrodite will follow Piper, and besides after the disaster you turned her hair into, they’ll probably be begging Piper to side against you. The original matchup was Ares versus Hermes, so you’ve got Ares to watch out for. If you’ve got half a hope of swinging any of the other cabins you’ve got to at least try to make amends,” you say.

“I said it’ll be fine.” He shrugs again and you sigh.

“Cecil-”

“Wow, would you look at that. It’s lunch time and I am starving, gotta fly.” With that he dodges
around you and sprints towards the exit.

“Cecil you are literally running away from your problems!” you call after him, but it goes in one ear and out the other. After a few seconds of staring at the door you decide to just sit down. It’s too early for this. “What page are you reading?” you ask Nico as you sit down. That seems to snap him out of a daze as he looks down at the page.

“Oh, I uh . . .” His eyes go wide and his mouth opens just a tiny bit. Then he’s blushing so hard even the pale skin of his arms turn rosy red. “So, capture the flag,” he says. You snort a laugh.

“Studying those sex scenes I see. Which one?” To your surprise Nico doesn’t get flustered again. Instead he shoots you a look out of the corner of his eye.

“You ask that like you have them memorized, Solace.” Now it’s your turn to be embarrassed. You bet that if you turned the lights out your face would be glowing.

“You know what talking about capture the flag sounds like a great idea, why don’t we talk about that?” You rub the back of your neck nervously. Nico looks as smug as you’ve ever seen him.

“Why did you say that Athena cabin would join Ares over Hermes. I thought Athena and Hermes were usually allies.” Nico shuts the book and lays it down across his lap.

“Oh. Malcolm, Annabeth’s second in command, is dating Miranda.” You sigh, leaning back in your chair. “I’m not sure how much he actually cares about the whole prank thing, but Malcolm’s the type of guy who’d twist anything to his advantage.”


“I don’t have a problem with Malcolm. He’s just-”

“Will, we have an emergency!” Oh, you know that voice and that voice does not sound happy.

“Give me a second . . .” You stand up from your chair and smile at Kyla as she stalks into the infirmary. Victoria is on her heels, looking thoroughly entertained. “How bad of an emergency?”
“Nissa is missing from crafts. Clovis said he last saw her with the Stoll brothers.” She puts her hands on her hips, and stares you down.

“What, no I left her with Percy.” You would remember. You literally threw her at him.

“You left her with Percy?” Kyla pinches the bridge of her nose. “Why, why would you do that?”

“I think the more important questions is why are you doing this instead of Austin. Isn’t this kind of thing usually his job?” Kyla frowns, shifting from foot to foot.

“I don’t know, I couldn’t find him.” She frowns slightly, a hint of worry flashing across her face before she snaps back to it. “Whatever, that’s not important. What is important is that you go find Nissa.”

“I’ve got to run the clinic.” You wave behind you. Kyla arches an eyebrow.

“There are only four patients in here right now. I think I can handle it while you fix this. Besides, Victoria’s here.” At that, Victoria’s gleeful smile melts away.

“Wait what?” It’s too late. Kyla is dragging Victoria away from the door so she can’t escape.

“Victoria obviously doesn’t want to work infirmary duty today, why don’t you just let her go search for Nissa?” you say.

“Never mind.” Victoria says quickly. “I’m actually really excited for infirmary duty. Nothing I love more than . . .” She looks around, and picks up the nearest bottle of something. “Cety. . . Cetyl-pyr. . . Pyrid. . . priding. . . Fuck it. This thing.” She waves it around in the air.

You sigh. Really, you should know better than to argue with your sisters.

“What?” he asks.

“It’s you’re last day.” You can’t quite seem to come up with a singular emotion to fit the way you feel. Of course you know Nico’s got to check out eventually. It’s a good thing. He needs the sunshine and activity. But you’re also . . . Well, you’re sad to see him go. You kind of liked this little bubble, but . . . You slap yourself out of it. You don’t have time to be thinking like this. You have a missing sister.


You swear your heart might stop.

“See you, Nico.”

. . .

You first find Percy at the docks, but Percy says he handed Nissa off to Jason. Jason was the one who handed her off to the Stoll brothers. Of course it was Jason. He claims that the Stoll brothers were heading to arts and crafts, so he figured it was fine. You barely remember the rest of your search. It’s just a blur of one lead after another after another. By the time you find your sister you’re exhausted, soaked from head to toe, there are twigs in your hair, your wallet is missing and your scrubs are singed. She’s sitting on the steps of the Athena cabin with Annabeth Chase.

“Will!” Nissa shrieks and smiles as she leaps off the steps and gives you a tackle hug.

“Hey Nissa. Did you have a good day?” You hadn’t even realized how worried you were. A weight lifts off your shoulder, and despite the fact that you’re pretty much a walking zombie, you feel great.

“It was amazing.” Her eyes sparkle like she’s watching the stars. “I played with Mrs. O’Leary, and went flying and I snuck into the camp store.”

“No kidding.” She nods emphatically.

“And I went swimming with the Naiads and they made me this dress.” She steps back a moment and
does a twirl.

“What happened to your other clothes?” you ask. She pauses, horror dawning on her face.

“I . . . I must have—”

“Left them with the Naiads?” you ask, holding up a wicker basket that has her shorts, t-shirt and shoes inside.

“Yes!” She points and smiles. “Yes, I left them when I went with the Dryads. They braided my hair, and told me stories about silly Satyrs and I met a Dryad named Juniper, and she was so pretty.” Nissa clutches at the soaked and ruined leg of your pants, looking up at you with wide eyes. “So pretty,” she says, like she doesn’t think you believe her.

“Oh yes, very pretty.” You remember Juniper. She was not happy to learn that you were the one who was supposed to be taking care of Nissa.

“And then Juniper took me to meet a wind nymph named Mellie. We had to be quiet though, because Mellie had a baby and the baby was sleeping. But Clarisse could play with me! Did you know that Clarisse got a new spear?” Nissa makes a few jabbing motions and you wince.

“Yes.”

“It’s huge and she uses it so fast! And it shoots lightning.”

“Believe me, I know.” You have the singed clothes to prove it.

“Oh, and then, Clarisse took me to see Annabeth.” Nissa waves over at Annabeth, who is hiding a smile behind her hand. “Annabeth has been taking care of me!”

“Has she?” you ask, looking up. “Thank you, Annabeth.”

“Yes, thank you Annabeth!” Nissa twirls around and waves her hand excitedly. You mouth a ‘sorry’.
“It’s no problem.” There seems to be something . . . scheming about her smile. No, it must be in your head. “Nissa told me all about her adventures today. It was very interesting.” She smiles again and you can’t shake the feeling that you have made a grave tactical error.

“Now we’re going to practice archery!” Nissa croons, grabbing your arm and dragging you away.

“Wait what?” You do your best to protest, but honestly you’re too tired to try and drag yourself away. Behind you, Annabeth laughs.

“Good luck at the training field,” she says, and then a little quieter she adds, "you're going to need it." Oh yes, you have definitely made a grave tactical error.

That is how you spend the afternoon practicing archery on an empty stomach, with a heavy cloud of doom looming over your shoulder.

. . .

It’s about an hour until dinner by the time you get back to the infirmary.

“You changed your clothes,” Kyla says as you walk through the door.

“Yeah.”

“Why is your arm bandaged?”

“Archery.”

“Why were you on the archery grounds?”

“Long story.”
“Well, I’m going to go,” Kyla says carefully. You nod, but then you notice something is missing.

“Where’s Victoria?”

“Oh she left a few hours ago.” You nod. Kyla doesn’t leave. “Are you alright Will?”

“Tired.” You stumble over your feet. Oh wait no. That’s a chair. You should watch where you’re going. “Hey, are you laughing?”

“You look like you’re been through Hades, man.” She walks by and pats you on the shoulder. “See you at dinner Will.” Mmmm, dinner.

“That’s soon right?”

“Yes, Will.”

“Thank the gods.” Kyla laughs again, and you hear the door shut.

“You look like a ghost,” Nico says, “I would know.” You just make a kind of grunting noise in affirmation and flop face down across the foot of his bed. “Hey, get off, you’re crushing my legs.”

“Five more minutes.”

“Get,” there’s a bit of a sharpness in your side as he kicks you, “off.” You grumble and pick yourself up, sitting back in the chair. Immediately your eyes begin to slip shut.

“I’m awake,” you insist.

“. . . I didn’t ask,” Nico says.
“I swear I’m awake.”

“There’s about forty minutes until dinner you know.” His voice seems softer, but you’re not sure. Maybe you’re already half asleep.

“Wake me up after thirty minutes.”

“Alright.”

“Swear it.” There’s a beat of silence.

“I swear it.”

Thirty minutes then. That’s plenty of time. You think as your eyes slip shut. Plenty

“Will,” Nico says. Your eyes crack open, just a hair. He must have forgotten to tell you something before you went to sleep.

“Hmm?” Nico is out of bed leaning over you. There’s a warmth blooming from your shoulder. You quickly realize that it’s his hand.

“You’re harder to wake than the dead,” Nico says.

“What?” you ask with a yawn.

“Your thirty minutes are up,” he says, straightening and crossing his arms over his chest. You tip your head back and groan. You shouldn’t have taken a nap. Now you’re just acutely aware of how exhausted you are.

“Alright, thanks.” As you stand up you swear you feel your joints creek. “Ugh, I’m turning into an old man.” You stretch your hands above your head, popping your back too for good measure. When you relax again Nico is staring at your shirt strangely. “Is there something on my shirt?” His eyes snap up almost immediately.
“Uh, no. No, it’s nothing,” he says hastily. The tips of his ears are pink. You’re not quite sure what you did to embarrass him this time. Maybe it’s just a social anxiety thing or something. You read about that last night too.

“Can I hold your hand?” you say, and Nico looks incredibly startled.

“Excuse me?” he asks. Okay that time you intentionally phrased it to embarrass him.

“I need to check your pulse.” He gives you a dirty look, but holds out his wrist anyway. This time he barely flinches when you take his wrist lightly in your hand. It reminds you of holding a bird. You press your fingers to his pulse and count his heart beats. Still empty. You’re not sure what you doing wrong.

“Will?” Nico is looking at you like he’s really worried. “You’re holding my wrist really tight.”

“Sorry.” You drop his hand immediately and let your own fall limply to your side. You hate that. You hate how your hands seem useless. Just to have something to do, you run one hand through your hair. The other slowly clenches and unclenches. It takes you a couple of seconds to realize that Nico’s noticed your agitation. His eyes are trained to the ground, one hand rubbing his arm like he’s got shivers he can’t shake.

Will you can’t do this. Get your shit together. It takes time. Remember that. You can’t seem disappointed like that. He’ll blame himself.

“Hey, Nico . . .” You take a breath and relax. Smile, you remind yourself, Look him in the eye. “Could I . . . could I try that again?” Nico peers up at you through his bangs. His eyes are full of sharp suspicion.

“Taking my pulse?” he asks.

“Yeah, feeling your energy,” you say. Nico still looks suspicious, but it’s more confused than it was before. “Your pulse points are the fast link to your . . . aura I guess? It’s a form of vitakinesis. I can feel your life force.”
“Like how you yelled at me about ‘feeling darkness’ in my hand or whatever when I was going to kill Octavian?” he asks. You nod, but you don't really like how easily Nico talks about murder. Nico looks down at his hands flexes them once or twice.

“Fine, whatever.” He sticks his hand out again. Just like last time, you can feel a cavern inside Nico’s wrist. However, you focus your thoughts on trying to grasp its depths.

“This might feel weird,” you warn.

“What are you doing?” he asks, and you can feel his wrist pull back just slightly.

“It’s a healer thing. It’s kind of hard to explain.” Nico just grunts in response. You close your eyes and focus on Nico’s life force first. It comes to you quickly, which is a good sign. The fact that shadows are reaching toward you instead of shying away means that Nico is still fighting. That’s good. That’s very good.

You take in one slow breath and then release it, opening up your own life force. It’s hard as tired as you are. Sweat beads on your forehead as you probe out into that cavern. You hit a bottom faster than you thought you would. However, that’s as far as you can go now. As soon as you reel in your own life force and release Nico’s hand he jerks away, cradling his hand against his chest.

“What was that?” His eyes are wide. You take a second to wipe a bit of the sweat off your forehead.

“It’s a technique that Castor and Pollux helped me come up with while we were trying to treat Chris after he came out of the labyrinth. It didn’t help much, but I found other uses.” You shrug, the memory still leaving a bitter taste in your mouth. “It lets me poke around inside your . . .” You search for the right words “Heart, I guess. The living bits. Maybe soul is a better word.” Nico nods slowly. “It’s exhausting, but it helps me understand things better.” Nico nods again, dropping his hand away from his chest.

“So?” ye asks.

“So what?” you say.

“So am I okay to use underworld magic now?”
“Oh.” You smile, “no.”

“What the Hades, Solace?” Nico scowls at you and you can’t help but laugh.

“You’re going to need at least two more weeks before you’re even allowed to summon a wishbone,” you say, although it’s not really a precise measurement. Really, he might spontaneously get better tomorrow, or never recover from his shadow use. You're honestly spit balling here. You’ve never dealt with underworld magic, and most of your mythological-medical texts haven’t either. Still, you think that’s a pretty good guess.


“That’s why I’m letting you out of the infirmary,” you say.

“Will this is ridiculous.” Nico presses a hand to his forehead, like you’re giving him a headache.

“Who was the one that just poked around at the edge of your soul?” you remind him.

“It’s my ‘soul’,” he does the stupid finger quotes, “and I think I’m fine.”

“Well I’m a medical professional. Doctor’s orders.” You are an incredibly mature and professional healer. Obviously you know what’s best.

“You’re not a real doctor.” He looks about ready to punch you. That one actually hurt your pride a bit.

“I am too a real doctor. I’ve performed surgery.” To be fair you were technically an assistant most of the time, but Nico doesn’t need to know that. You've done it like three times on your own. Besides, it looks like that won your argument.

“I can’t believe someone trusted you to perform surgery on them,” Nico groans. “Okay, you know what? You win. I won’t use magic for a week, happy?”
“Ecstatic.” You stick out your hand. Nico pauses for a second. “It’s a hand shake. Come on, I don’t bite.” He glares at you and shakes your hand. “Nico Di Angelo, you are officially discharged from the infirmary. Don’t forget to check back in with either me or Kyla at least once a week for the next two weeks to see how things are going.” He rolls his eyes at you.

“Sure thing.” He heads towards the door and you follow suit. “I thought you said I’d be free of you.”

“Hey, I’m heading to dinner too,” You say, hand over your heart. “It’s not my fault we both need food to survive. Besides, I never said you’d be free of me. I’m not easy to get rid of.” Nico rolls his eyes again. *If he keeps doing that they’re going to roll right out of his head,* you think.

“Whatever,” he says, but he looks a little relieved. Anyway, the two of you walk together as far as the cabins. However from there, you’re on your own.

The signal sounds just as you’re reaching your door.

“Well,” you say as you open the door “what are you all waiting for?” Kyla’s the first out the door, shoving you out of the way. You take a quick attendance as your siblings file out.

“Where’s Austin?” you ask. Kyla shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders.

“I saw him talking with Rachel earlier.” One of your siblings pipes up.

“Thanks.” You nod to her as you jog to your place at the front of the line. “Alright, move out troops!”

You are so fucking ready to sit down and eat something.

. . .

When you stop by the infirmary after dinner to pick up a few things, you nearly die of fright. There’s a *person* there. Well, there are normally people there, but Nico had been the last overnight patient
and you know he left. The room is only half lit, with a lamp still on here and there. Despite the dancing shadows, the Roman praetor seems perfectly at home.

“Can I help you?” you ask. She looks up from something in her hands and eyes you warily.

“I’m looking for Nico di Angelo. Chiron said that he had been checked into the infirmary.” Straight and to the point. Well at least this’ll all be over soon. There’s something about her presence that unnerves you.

“What do you need Nico for?” It’s weird that she’s here. After all, the Romans left just three days ago. You don’t know why she’d be back already.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I came to give him his toga. He played a very important political role in our camp as an Ambassador to Pluto, and it’s his right to keep the toga now that our camps are united.” That’s news to you. You never knew that Nico had ever gone to the other camp, let alone actively participated in its politics.

“I checked him out just before dinner. He’s probably back at his cabin by now. If you just head straight towards the beach, you’ll be at the cabins.” You’re not sure how well she knows the camp, but she looks annoyed. You guess that means she already knew where to go.

“Thank you.” Her words are clipped and hard. You remind yourself to smile, and try your best not to look nervous.

“No problem. Oh, uh is that The Song of Achillies, by the way?” you ask, she looks down at the book, peering around at the cover.

“Yes it is. Is it yours?” she asks.

“No, it’s actually Nico’s. Since you’re going back to his cabin would you mind giving it to him?” You hadn’t even realized he left it here.

“This belongs to Nico,” she says it like she can’t quite believe it and then goes back to scanning over the page.
“Um, yeah?” You’re not quite sure what the problem is. Maybe she didn’t know Nico was gay? Well you kind of guessed from the moment you met him, but you also have a fine tuned gay-dar. You are always right. Except with Malcolm. That guy just gives off weird vibes.

“Nico is still a child. He can’t be reading things like this. This is far too inappropriate.” She scowls and snaps the book shut with one hand.

“Nico’s fourteen, I think he’ll be fine,” you say offhandedly. The praetor turns only her head towards you, eyes narrowed. If looks could kill, you’d be six feet under.

“Excuse me?” she says.

“I mean he can’t stay ignorant forever, and it’s not even that bad—“

“Nico is still a child.” Her voice is low, and finely controlled. You swallow. Maybe you shouldn’t have said anything. “He needs to be protected.”

“Protected?” Still you can’t help but say that. “Look, I hate to break this to you, but Nico’s been through some shit.”

“You think I don’t know?” she says. You remember her speech at dinner. You forgot for a moment just how fundamentally important the Roman praetor seemed to be to Nico. You forgot that you don’t actually know him.

“Sex isn’t some monster that people need to be defended against. I mean Nico should have had sex ed. by now,” you say. Well maybe not considering he went to school in the forties, and then just stopped interacting with society for a while. “I mean, even if he somehow avoided that, trying to keep him ignorant will only hurt him in the long run. I’m sorry, but exploring these kinds of things are important.” You tense, ready for her to strike out at you. However, after a few seconds she seems to relax.

“No . . . No, you’re right. Nico needs to learn about these things so he’s safe.” She looks down at the book. “I’ll have to . . . to research this and talk to him about it.”

“You’re going to give Nico the talk?” It spills out of your lips before you know what you’re saying. The praetor rounds on you. Just before your heart leaps into your throat, you have a kind of strange
thought. The way she turns to you has such fine military precision, that you can almost feel a sword coming for your throat. Everything about the way she turns and she flexes, her body moves before her head, as if to strike automatically. As soon as that thought sinks in an arc of fear shoots through your body, doing it’s best to flip your fight or flight switch.

“Do you have a problem with that?” There’s no word for the way she executes that sentence. Icy is too rigid and too far removed. It’s not like carving into stone, that’s to crude, to halting. Steel is too soft and to say she spoke like steel would be to deny how fluid and comfortably those words moved to strike you right through the heart.

“No, absolutely not, no problem at all.” You hadn’t even realized you were backing away until you bump your back against the door. “You’d be a great choice. The best choice. I wish you could have given me the talk.”

Why, why would you say that? You wish you could face palm, but you're literally frozen in fear. Now you’ve made it so weird. All you can do is scream internally. You are so painfully aware of how easy it would be for her to kill you. You don’t even know anything about the Roman praetor, you can just feel it. This is the worst.

“You said you checked out Nico, would that make you the head doctor here?” She looks like that thought disturbs her.

“Yes.” You almost say ‘Yes ma'am’, but decide that she might think you’re being sarcastic.

“You were the one who taught our doctors those hymns. They’re very effective,” she says.

“Uh, well that’s wasn’t really me actually. You see my sister Kyla, she’s my second in command in the hospital here, she was the one who did most of the hymn teaching.” This small talk is so awkward you wish you could just phase through the door.

“Is she the poetry one?” Going from blinding to terror to unbearably awkward is giving you whiplash.

“No that’s Austin. He’s my nurse.” You’re really not sure why you’re making small talk in the first place.
“Oh, I had thought those were the same people.” Maybe she wants to ask you something important.

“No, they’re very different people.” Except, that doesn’t really seem to be the case. This is just pointless chatter.

“Ah.” You don’t see why she doesn’t just leave.

“Yeah.” She continues to stares at you.

“I need to leave.” She points at the door. That’s right. You’re standing in front of the door. Now you feel like an idiot.

“Oh, yes, right. Well, say hi to Nico for me.” You slide out of the way and she continues to look at you strangely.

“Are you friends with Nico?” she asks. It occurs to you then, that up until now the Roman praetor hadn’t really acknowledged you. You were just one of those innocuous background people that everybody meets. Now, she actually seems to be studying you.

“I don’t know, but maybe,” you reply as honestly as you can. She seems like the type that can sense a lie. “I want to get closer to him. I think he’s the kind of person I’d like to have in my life.” At that, she raises an eyebrow.

“What did you say your name was?” she asks. You actually hadn’t given her your name yet.

“Will Solace.” For obviously reasons, you decide not to correct her. She nods, and then she leaves. You release a breath you hadn’t realized you were holding, and press your face into your hands.

You can’t wait to go back home.

... 

She gives three short raps against the door, and then calls his name. “Nico?” There’s a noticeable
pause and then the sound of feet padding against the floor. The door creeks open to reveal Nico, only half dressed in his pajamas and no shoes. He’s going to catch a cold that way.

“Reyna?” Nico asks, staring as if she might disappear at any moment.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” she says with a wry smile and Nico immediately steps away from the door, allowing her in before closing the door. The Hades cabin is . . . interesting, to say the least. There’s something about the stray fast food wrappers and the multitude of pastel colored pillows and sheets that just doesn’t match with the rest of the awful vampiric decoration.

“What are you doing here?” He moves clumsily through the mass of pillows and blankets on the floor as he reaches for his pajama top. She’s not really sure how the pajama top differs from his day-to-day clothes, as it’s just a plain black t-shirt. She secretly suspects that there’s no real difference and makes a mental note to buy him proper pajamas.

“I came to give you your toga.” She slings the bag off of her shoulder, and pulls out the long black drape. “I found it while we were talking stock of our equipment during a pit stop. I thought . . .” She doesn’t know quite how to say it now. It was easy to tell the doctor boy that it was Nico’s right. It’s strange, how it’s only been a few days and she already feels estranged from Nico. She has never been good at keeping up relationships with people.

“You came all the way back just to give it to me?” Reyna looks up from where she was studying the way the silky fabric pooled and folded. Nico is staring at the fabric too, his expression . . . soft.

“Yes,” she says. “We hadn’t gone far, but even if we had, I would have still delivered your toga.” She is not the same person she used to be. She can be open. They both can. The speech about how it was his right melts away. “I wanted you to have it, so you had a piece of New Rome with you while you stayed here.” Nico looks up from the toga, to Reyna. She smiles for all she’s worth. That softness in his face changes, less hopeful and more awed.

“Thank you,” he says. His hand reaches forward, tentatively. There’s a moment of hesitation, like he’s afraid he might slip right through. Then he takes the robe from you. “Thank you,” he says again, this time under his breath. Reyna wonders if this was the reason her sister always fought so hard, and was willing to give up her own identity to protect her family. Reyna thinks, that perhaps she would do the same thing.

“So,” Reyna reaches down, and picks up the edge of a pink blanket, “I’m guessing these do not belong to you?” Nico shakes his head, trying to navigate the mess around his dresser.
“Piper and the Aphrodite cabin organized it as a surprise. Honestly I think it was probably Jason’s idea. I complained the other day about how uncomfortable my cabin is.” He scowls at the center of the cabin. “Then when I got home today, there was a mess in my cabin and a note explaining things.” The more she stares at it, the more Reyna has come to realize that it’s a nest of pillows and blankets.

“I thought they were supposed to have good taste?” Reyna asks, dropping the blanket back to the ground. Nico snorts a laugh and throws a knowing look over his shoulder as he tucks the toga away. Reyna looks at the pillow nest again. Well, it does look comfortable, and she is tired. “It could have been worse. They could have gotten you a zombie chauffer to keep you company.” This time, there’s a real and true laugh. Reyna kicks her boots off near the door, drops her bag and armor (though she is very careful to fold her cape), and climbs into the center of the pillow nest, flopping down on her back. After a few seconds she is able to confirm that it is in fact very comfortable.

There’s another snort of laughter, and Reyna looks up to find Nico standing at the edge of the nest with his arms crossed.

“You look ridiculous, you know that? Where’s all that strict Roman dignity?” He waves a lazy hand at you.

“You are simply jealous because I am nice and comfy in the pillow nest.” She throws one of her pillows at him to prove her point.

“Am not.” He swats it away easily enough, and that’s all the opportunity she needs to grab his arm and pull him down. As hard as he tries, he can’t quite stifle his laugh. He orientates himself, and lies on his back next to her.

“How did you get back here so fast?” Nico asks after a moment. Reyna looks over, but Nico’s still studying the ceiling.

“Guido came with me when we left camp. According to Percy, he adopted me.” At that Nico turns his head towards Reyna to give her a look.

“The horse adopted you?” She pokes him gently in the forehead.

“Well regardless, when I explained the situation he immediately offered to fly me back.” Nico nods,
and then looks back at the ceiling. He looks so young when he’s relaxed like this. He’s still so new to the world, for all of the horrors he’s faced. That reminds Reyna about the book. She still needs to do some research, but right now seems like the perfect opportunity. Well, she supposes that right now she could tell him what she knows, and they could talk again later. These things are best done in parts anyway.

“Will Solace says hello,” she says.

“What?” Nico sits up and looks over at her.

“I stopped by the infirmary to check and see if you were there.” Reyna sits up as well, crossing her legs and rolling her shoulders. “The doctor asked me to pass along a hello. Also I have your book.” She points in the general direction of her bag.

“Oh, thanks.” Tension has crept back into Nico’s face. She can tell by the way it ages him, not physically necessarily. Nico still looks like a child, or rather, he looks like an atavistic fragment trapped in the body of a child. Reyna doesn’t like it.

“He’s a very strange one,” she comments. At that Nico smiles and shakes his head.

“Yeah,” he says it almost unconsciously. “He’s overbearing, and a know it all, and sometimes he’s an asshole but . . .” Nico shrugs and runs and hand through his hair. “He seems like he really cares and he fesses up to his mistakes.” The smile on his face widens a little more. “He’s strange, but a good kind of strange, you know?” Reyna watches Nico carefully as he speaks. She makes note of the way the tension drains back out of him again.

“Do you like him?” she asks, and that startles Nico out of his peaceful stupor.

“What? No that’s ridiculous!” He waves his arms in the most emphatic ‘no’ sign she has ever seen.

“Really?” Reyna’s not sure if he really means that or he’s embarrassed. It’s hard for her to tell these sorts of things. Gossip and 'boy-talk' were never her strong points. “I thought he was fairly attractive.” Maybe he’s just not Nico’s type. She wonders if Nico even has a type.

“No I mean . . .” Nico’s blushing, so Reyna assumes that he’s simply embarrassed by the situation.
“So you do find him attractive?” Reyna makes a mental note to have a background check done on Will Solace.

“Okay fine. Yes. I do, but I barely know the guy!” Nico insists and she nods. This feels like progress to Reyna.

“That’s fair. He just mentioned wanting to get closer to you, so I was curious. I know almost nothing about this camp or how you think of the people in it.”

“It’s fine. It’s probably better to just assume that everyone is a stranger to me.” Reyna puts an arm around Nico’s shoulder and give him a little squeeze.

“Then what a grand opportunity.” Nico doesn’t say anything, but Reyna can feel the little breath he lets out. It’s much too soft and a little too relieved to be a laugh. After a few seconds, Reyna herself sighs. She’s been stalling long enough.

“You sound like you want to say something important,” Nico says. When Reyna sits up and faces him, she’s surprised to see him looking patiently back at her. Perhaps, Reyna is not the only one who has been learning to read their new friend.

“Nico, I think it’s time we had a talk.”

...
“I got caught up at the infirmary talking about sex ed. with the Roman praetor,” you say as you struggle to your feet. She looks at you strangely.

“That’s a lie so ridiculous, I think it might be the truth.” You can only shrug.

“I wish I was lying. That girl is terrifying.” You climb to your feet, hoisting the tiny terrors with you. They jump up and down, and they tell you about their day. You nod and make comments despite having been there for most of the events, or at least having heard them before. “Wait a minute,” you say as you get to your bed, “it’s clean.” Now you may be a bit over tired, but you swear that your bed and your section of floor were most definitely not clean this morning. In fact, most of the cabin is pretty darn clean.

“Oh, you looked kind of beat after you found Nissa, so I figured that I’d get everyone to help out and clean up a bit.” Kyla shrugs and shuffles her feet. “The twins did the laundry,” she points to Jamie-Lyn and Devereux, who smile and wave while simultaneously fist bumping each other, “Victoria did the folding.”

“I’m fucking awesome at folding.” You try not to laugh at that.

“Language,” Kyla reminds and Victoria looks like she’s about to swear again before she catches herself.

“Ffffrickin’.”

“Chloe did trash patrol and made sure to clean out under the bed.” Chloe smiles and points to her bow.

“And the rest of the room?” you ask. Kyla shrugs.

“We put on some music and just picked up a bit.” For a moment you sideline the little ones to give you other sister a hug.

“You’ll make a great counselor,” you say it quietly. She socks you on the arm for it, but you don’t mean it any less.
“Bed time!” Milo shouts, and it quickly devolves into a yawn. Around you, a chorus of older kids mumbles in agreement.

“Is Austin still not back yet?” you ask Kyla, as the rest of your siblings begin to ready themselves for bed. There’s some shoving over by the curtained off changing corner, but you know it’s nothing to worry about.

“Honey, I’m home!” Austin, shuts the door behind him. He looks weary, but fulfilled. It looks like he figured out whatever he needed to talk to Rachel about.

“Hey, you stole my line.” You sock him in the shoulder and he just shrugs.

“The most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.” Austin claps you on the shoulder with a smile.

You are glad to be back home.

Chapter End Notes

Reyna is my queen. I adore her so thoroughly. Will has a right to be intimidated. Reyna is a mortal goddess.

Also, while I don't think it's ever explicitly stated that the Apollo cabin is large, I always got the impression that it was one of the biggest cabins at camp. I imagine it has around fifteen-sixteen kids, as compared to around the 30 that Hermes cabin would have.

Austin's references are, in order:

Keats "To Sleep" (here I used brackets, which are traditionally used in essays and such to make the grammar of an inserted quote mesh with the grammar of the essay. I thought it would be a funny joke for him to use them in his speech. I know I'm such a nerd) and Shakespeare's "Orpheus" (only the Killing care and grief of heart, part)

Richard Wilbur "Lying"

"Honey, I'm home" is a line from the TV show by the same name. It's just a famous saying. I know I cheated there. I'll probably continue to cheat a little here and there.

T.S. Elliot "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Which is actually an essay by Elliot, but everything Elliot says is poetry so I think it counts.
In the strange dream sequence written at the begging, there's a reference to Keats' "Hyperion: A Fragment". Knowing the poem (or any of the poems mentioned by Austin) is not necessary to understanding the plot or the situation. Anything you need to know about "Hyperion" I'll explain as the plot develops (the poem plays an important part in some mythology stuff), but it might make it more interesting for you if you're into literary analysis. Also, "words, words, words" is a line from Hamlet said by the eponymous hero of the play during a pretend (or real) fit of madness. I suppose you could say there's a bit of method to all of that dream madness.

If you have questions about anything let me know. I don't usually respond to comments just because it's difficult to convey a dopey smile and high pitched squealing noises with dignity and style, however I'd be more than happy to answer questions.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Will gets some strangely life altering advice from a rag-tag bunch of minor gods, has another weird dream, and interacts with Malcolm, the not so friendly Athena Cabin future head counselor, or as I like to call him, Neo-Clausese. After all, where's the fun in sweeping adventure stories if there's not some frenemy constantly ruining your day.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry this took so long. I am so sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You wake up before the rest of your family and you're not quite sure why. You don't feel entirely real, like somehow you're still half stuck in a dream. There's a buzzing across your body that makes it impossible to close your eyes again. It's like sitting on the edge of an impossible drop or the feeling of a monster nearby when you're surrounded by people. You brush it off and struggle out of bed. You're safe here at camp, or as safe as it's possible to be as a half-blood. Chloe's bed is empty, but you know she gets up at like six to go practice archery before breakfast. That gives you some sense of time. If Austin's not awake yet, it's before eight. You think for a moment about finding a clock but brush it off. Instead you slip into a pair of shorts, pulling on your shirt as you head out the door. You figure that it can't hurt to check in with the infirmary before breakfast. After all, yesterday was so crazy that you didn't get any of that paperwork done.

Across the grass you spot the Hades cabin. In the grey light of the early morning, it looks like a relic. Sure, it's dark and foreboding, but the grey light strips it of its heavy gothic atmosphere. As you meander down your steps you notice the door creek open. The Roman praetor steps out of the door, shortly followed by Nico in a pair of ratty old sweatpants and a black t-shirt. You watch for a moment, as they exchange a silent goodbye. A pegasus swoops down out of the air, ruffling the grass at their feet. Reyna gives Nico one last hug, before she mounts her pegasus and is off. Nico continues to stand there and watch as Reyna's silhouette shrinks into a tiny dot in the sky and then disappears all together. He turns your way a bit, head looking up. You give him a little wave. Nico waves back.

You wonder if Nico would ever want to go on a walk with you. Then something slams into your back.

“Hey Will,” Cecil slings an arm around your shoulder, “Can you do me a favor?” You look back to where Nico was standing, but he's not there anymore. You guess he went back to sleep.
“I’m going to regret this aren’t I?”

You sigh, running your hand through your hair. “Remind me why I’m doing this again?” you ask. Cecil gives you a light shove.

“Because, Apollo and Hermes are going to need help if we don’t want to get our asses handed to us during capture the flag.” He’s practically hiding behind you, only peering out from behind to look at the door. For someone who spends half their time stealing, you find it ridiculous that Cecil hates asking for things from strangers.

“Yes, but why am I doing this. This is your problem.” Cecil starts to wine, high pitched and continuous. “Okay stop.” He doesn’t. “Stop it man.” You can feel the beginning of a headache already. “How are you still doing that, don’t you need to breath?” You wait another six seconds before giving up. “Alright, alright. Just stop it. I’ll knock.” Cecil shuts up immediately and gives you a dazzling smile before he goes back to hiding behind your back. You take in a slow breath before knocking. There’s about a thirty-second pause, then you hear the padding of feet across the wood floor.

“Hello?” A girl a little younger than you opens the door, tall and lithe, with short black hair and bright blue eyes. Her face is soft and pretty, though a bit pale. She looks kind of confused, and a little bit suspicious.

“Hi, I’m Will. This is Cecil.” You step to the side to reveal your friend. He straightens, and clears his throat, looking thoroughly nervous. “We were wondering if Asteria cabin would be on our team for capture the flag.” The girl leans out the door a bit to look around.

“Is this some kind of prank?” she asks. You guess your offense must show on your face, because the Asteria kid back petals instantly. “I mean, it’s just . . . You do know that I’m the only one in this cabin right? It’s just me.” She kicks the door open to reveal an empty cabin. It’s clean, but in a way that makes the room feel unlived-in. There are no lights on and thick blinds are drawn closed, but the ceiling is painted with constellations that throw a bit of silver light across the room.

“I figured that most of the lesser gods only had one or two kids,” you say, wondering what it’s like to have an entire cabin to yourself. “So, is that a yes or a no?” She continues to look at you strangely.

“Are you planning on going around to all of the lesser gods’ cabins?” she asks. You fight the urge to sigh, because yes, you are going around to all of the lesser gods’ cabins and asking, and that’s a lot of people, and you would really appreciate it if you could get an answer, because at this rate, it’s going to take all day.

“That’s the plan,” you say with a smile, rubbing the back of your neck. Her eyes go wide and she just stands there staring at you for a moment. “Are you alright?” you ask. She nods, just slightly.

“No one ever asks us to join in capture the flag,” she says. Now it’s your turn to look confused.

“What do you mean?” You cock your head to the side, running your hand through your hair. “How do you decide whose team you’re going to be on?” The girl looks at the ground.
“When we were all shoved into Hermes, we just, you know, played with Hermes. Now . . . I usually just don’t play. It’s kind of intimidating you know?” There’s a moment, where she looks up and smiles slightly and you feel so overwhelmingly guilty. You’ve been in charge of capture the flag plenty of times, and it’s never occurred to you to ask about all the minor gods until you need their help. “Sometimes me and a few of the other kids of minor gods will sneak in, but most of the time we just have movie marathons on Fridays.” She shrugs.

“Oh, um. In that case I understand if you don’t want to join our team.” If it were him, he’d would have out and out slammed the door in their faces for even asking this time. However, the girl just shakes her head.

“No, I’d love to be on your team.” She then pauses, and looks inside. “Come inside for a moment.” You look at Cecil, who had somehow snuck back behind you. He just shrugs, and shoves you forward a bit. Inside the Asteria cabin the world seems to grow quieter. You shut the door as softly as you can before taking a moment to admire the room. While the outside doesn’t look like anything special, the inside certainly is. The inside of its domed roof is decorated in the same deep blue as the night sky, and speckled with glowing silver stars. When you look closer, you can see that there are constellations, and that the constellations are *moving*. Cecil lets out a low whistle.

“Some place you got here,” he says. The girl looks over at you two.

“Hm? Oh yeah, I guess.” After a few seconds, you look over to her, and realize that she’s whispering into an old tin can with a string attached to it, leading out the window.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what are you doing?” You’re not going to lie, that’s kind of weird.

“You said you were going to go around to all of the minor gods’ cabins right? This will be easier.” She holds up the tin can and shakes it a bit. “I’m connected to the Nike cabin. Pax always answers when I call, and he can send one of his siblings out to hunt down everyone else.” You’re kind of touched that this girl, whose name you don’t even know, would try and help you. It also brings a bit of guilt back to the surface, for all of the times you didn’t even think of the minor gods. “Come on,” she says, beckoning you outside, “we can wait on the steps.”

“I never got you name, by the way,” you say, and she looks a bit embarrassed by that.

“Sorry, I can be a scatterbrain sometimes.” She sticks out her hand and smiles. “Ester,” she says. You nod, and take a seat on the steps of her cabin. She sits next to you, and Cecil sits on the other side. It only takes a few minutes for the cabin right next door to burst open, and two kids go sprinting in opposite directions, shouting about something you don’t quite catch. After a few moments, another kid walks out slowly. His hands are shoved in his pockets, and he has a sullen look on his face, like walking over is just so troublesome. You recognize him from the time he visited the infirmary for his vitiligo, when it first started happening.

“I see Raven and Cole are at it again,” Ester says, popping to her feet. “This is Pax,” she says with a wave, and the boy in question just shrugs.

“Whatever.” He scratches behind his head. “I meant to just ask Raven, but you know how it goes. Competition and whatever.” You’re kind of surprised to realize that this kid is the Nike head counselor. He seems like he lacks everything the other Nike kids have, the drive, the loud assertions of their own superiority, and the constant movement.

“You’re lucky!” Ester says brightly, clapping Pax on the back as he comes closer. Pax grunts, and his frown deepens a bit. “He’s the most gifted of all Nike’s kids.”
“That’s not saying much,” Pax quickly adds, “There are three of us, and the other two are idiots.”

“One on one, he never loses,” Ester says, and you notice a blush spread out across Pax’ face.

“It’s not a big deal,” he says again. However, before Ester can say anything more, a sudden bout of shouting rises up. You look to your right and see one of the other Nike kids sprinting your way, a gaggle of kids at their heel.

“Ha!” says the boy in front, whom you assume is Cole. “I’m first!”

“Wait!” From the other side of the cabins, a girl is leading her own troop of kids. She arrives slightly out of breath, but with a fierce look on her face. She takes a second counting the groups behind Cole, before smiling. “Ha! You only brought eight! I brought nine!” She stands proudly, with her hands on her hips. The way they go about bickering reminds you of the twins in your cabin, Jamie and Devereux, though these two look nothing alike. Cole is tiny and white as a sheet, while Raven towers above him only a few shades lighter than Austin.

“Stop fighting,” Pax commands, “Introduce yourselves.” What follows is kind of a blur for you. There are nineteen children of minor gods in total (excluding Hecate cabin, because you already talked to Lou) and most of them are only children, or one of two. You’re surprised to find that there’s a child of Eros there, whose name escapes you, but you remember how shy he was. You recognize the child of Rumor as Devereux’s girlfriend, Danny, or something. Maybe her name was Blaire. You’re not really sure. There’s also a child of Erebus, which frightens you, and then there’s Butch and one of his siblings from Iris cabin. You find the Nemesis kid only mildly less disconcerting than the Erebus kid, but neither can compare to the eerie feeling the child of Morpheus gives you. Although, maybe that’s just because of the huge bags underneath his eyes. You forget the rest, and make it a point to ask them all again at a later date.

“…"

“So,” Cecil says as you two sit outside the Hermes cabin, watching the sun sink down, “Do you think we have a chance?” You nod, however before you can respond Lou Ellen pops up.

“Hey there guys,” she says, taking a seat on your other side and bumping your shoulder lightly. “How did the hunt for help go?”

“I don’t know,” you reply. “We’re not as badly outnumbered as we were, but I don’t know what half of these kids can do and we’ve got no time.”

“Who all did you get to agree to help you?” she asks, tilting her head. “One of my brothers was talking about it earlier, but I wasn’t really listening.”

“Um, all of the minor gods I think,” you say, scratching the back of your head. Yeah, you’re pretty sure it was all of them. Lou blinks at you.

“All of them?” she asks. Cecil cuts in once again.

“Yeah, this chick named Ester helped us out. She was really surprised we asked for her help, so she had the Nike cabin help us out and then there was just this crowd of kids and it was a mess but it was fun,” he says and you thump him in the forehead.
“I was going to say that,” you say.

“Yeah, but you were going to be boring,” he replies. Lou Ellen cuts you both off with a quiet whistle.

“You guys, we might actually stand a chance.” She shakes her head, smiling.

“Are you forgetting that Cecil’s attempt to sway the Hephaestus cabin ended in him setting the Hephaestus cabin on fire?” you say. “And that after that, none of the other major cabins would touch us?” Lou gives you a wry smile.

“We may be misfits you know, but the children of minor gods have a trick or two up their sleeves.” You nod, and can only hope that she’s right.

...  

Your team for capture the flag is shaping up to be a hot mess. On a whim, you asked Ester to gather the children of minor gods so you could evaluate everyone’s strength. It turned out to be one of the better decisions you’ve made in a long time. An arrow zings over your head, missing you by a hair. Or, maybe it’s one of the worst.

It’s no surprise that the Nike kids are great at everything, although they do seem to get distracted trying to one up each other. The head counselor is currently going head to head with Chloe at archery, and to your surprise he’s holding his own so far. The kid’s been holding a bow for maybe forty minutes, and he’s already split his bulls-eye right down the center with another arrow. However, the other kids... Well Butch is killing it as always. The Morpheus kid is passed out in the corner, the Eros kid is bleeding where he accidentally hit himself in the head with his sword, and you’re pretty sure the Erebus kid is plotting your doom. You still find him really creepy. It doesn’t help that he doesn’t seem to be doing anything but standing there. He’s just standing. He hasn’t moved in forty minutes. You’re not entirely sure he’s been breathing. At least the Nemesis kid is working on drawing up battle plans with the Stoll brothers.

“Hey!” Ester runs up to your side and smiles with a short wave. Her hair is plastered to her forehead with sweat and there are little cuts and bruises all along her arms, but she looks happy. “How is everything looking?”

“Well, some are doing better than others,” you say with a wince as a child of Hebe nearly sticks Cecil with a stray arrow. Ester laughs.

“Well, most of us aren’t really suited to fighting. Our skills lie elsewhere.” She gives you a bright thumbs up. “We’re a bunch of secret weapons!”

“Secret weapons huh?” Your gaze drifts over to the child of Morpheus. “I guess being able to fall asleep anywhere is a super power.” Ester looks at you strangely.

“He’s not sleeping,” she says. Now it’s your turn to give her a strange look. “I mean he is asleep, but he’s not like... resting. He’s spying.” You continue to stare back blankly and she takes that as a cue to continue explaining. “He can invade other people’s dreams, even day dreams if he’s really trying and the person is really zoned out. I think he was going to try and figure out the other team’s plans.” You nod slowly, looking back over to the Morpheus kid and feeling kind of dumb.
“Who else has abilities that aren’t suited for fighting?” you ask, and you can feel the beginning of a plan forming.

“Well,” she looks around the area, before pointing over at the son of Eros, and another kid you hadn’t really registered before. “See that kid with Eric? His name is Alexi, but we all call him Honey. He’s the child of Ganymede.”

“And?” You rack your brain. You think Ganymede was the immortal cupbearer, but you’re not sure.

“He’s practically invisible,” she says firmly, “It’s not like he’s actually invisible, it’s just that people are always overlooking him. It’s like how you go to a restaurant and don’t even register the waiter really. He can slip in to just about any group of people and go completely unnoticed. Even when he is noticed, well . . . Look at how cute he is. People hardly ever take him seriously.’’

You look closely, and now that she mentions it, he is kind of adorable. He’s a fumbling mess trying to help patch up the son of Eros, but there’s no mistaking that he holds a kind of magnetic charm.

“Also,” Ester continued, “He always has anything you need. Like those bandages. Where did they come from? It just appears. I don’t even think he realizes that it’s happening.” You nod.

“Can, uh,” you try really hard to remember what the other one’s name is. “Eric?” she nods, and you’re kind of thankful for that, “Can he do anything?” At that Ester bursts out into a fit of giggles.

“Have you ever heard of charm speak?” she asks. Your eyes go wide.

“He can do that?”

“Sort of,” she says, trying to school her expression. “But only if he’s saying something really, uh, sexual.” You nod slowly, and then something occurs to you.

“What about you, do you have any cool power?” Ester smiles slightly.

“Kind of.” She shrugs.

“Well, now I’m curious. Come on, can you show me?” you ask. She pauses for a second before nodding. You watch closely as Ester cups her hands together and focuses on them. Then she opens them just the slightest amount, blowing into her palm, and releasing what looks like a flurry of blue fireflies into the air. Your jaw goes slack as you watch them clamber into the sky. Even after they flicker out, you find yourself staring up at the sky. “What was that?” you ask. She looks at you strangely again.

“Stars,” she says, and then shrugs again. “I mean, I can only produce a little bit of light. You’re a son of Apollo, so I mean it’s probably nothing like what you can do.” She shrugs again. You blink.

“What?”

“Apollo is the sun god right?” she says. You nod. “Doesn’t that give you, like photokinesis powers too?”

“Photo-what?”

“Like light magic power things.” She waves her hands through the air, gesturing around.

“I’ve never thought about it.” You blink for a few seconds, wondering. Had you ever seen your siblings do anything with light? Maybe, maybe when you were really little, but no that had been just a trick of the light. You look down at your hands. “How does it feel when you do that?”
“Like . . .” she pauses for a second, “It feels like whispering a silly secret with someone. There’s a little fuzzy feeling, warm and kind of . . . bursting?” She shakes her head. “It’s hard to understand.”

“No, I think I get it.” You try and think of all your favorite moments, of Lou’s face when she was claimed, of the first time you and all your siblings broke out in a musical number for no reason, of the time your mom snuck you onto her movie set, and you think about Nico, his smile, his little laugh, that time at the battle of Manhattan, when he stood in the wreckage of that city like an ancient myth come to life. For a second, you think you can feel a strange tingling sensation in your hands. However, the battle of Manhattan quickly takes your thoughts to a much darker place, to lives you couldn’t save, and whatever flicker you might have had is snuffed out. “No good,” you say, laughing nervously.

“Well, it takes time. It was something I learned because I was afraid of the dark,” she says firmly. “I’m sure that you could do it if you wanted.” You look at her curiously.

“You’re really nice.” It seems like a stupid thing to say after it leaves your mouth, but you’ve already said it, and you wouldn’t take it back anyway. At that Ester just looks embarrassed.

“I have plenty of reason to be nice,” she says, and her eyes lift up from the ground trailing out across the coliseum. “Look at everyone. I mean, look at Landon!” She points at the Erebus kid just standing. “He never goes outside unless it’s dark. He gets up before sunrise for breakfast, and won’t leave for dinner until the sun is set. Honey has to bring him lunch. But look, he’s out here in the sunlight!” she laughs. “Just like that, he’s outside. It may seem small to you, but just asking someone something silly, like to be on your team can mean a lot.” You pause for a moment, before nodding.

“I’ll remember that.” Without meaning too, you start to think about Nico.

Come closer, she beckons you. Come closer and I will show you, she says. Her face is veiled, and simply looking into that veiled face sends a shiver of terror down your back. Her hands are cupped in front of her body, like they’re holding something secret. Still, you do as she commands. You forgot, oh you forgot, but this . . . I will show you. It has been a long time, a very long time since I have shown anyone this. Look now, look. Let knowledge immortal fill you, look. Her voice seems to scream in your mind and she opens her palms. From her hands burst forth celestial-

“Hey Will?” Lou pokes your shoulder lightly. “You zoned out there again.” You look down at your hands, frozen over the fastenings of your armor.

“Yeah, sorry. I was just,” you swallow past a strange lump in your throat, “I was remembering a weird dream I had.”

“What was it about?” she asks, fixing the way her shirt lays underneath her breastplate.

“I don’t know, it was strange and now?” You look back down at your hands, and think that maybe they’re shaking a tiny bit. “It’s faded. I don’t really remember it.” Lou just hums an acknowledgement of that statement.

“Well, hurry up. The Stoll brothers said that they were going to give a rundown of our attack plan before we went in.” You know most of the plan, but you nod anyway. She heads off without you, and you’re left alone on the steps of the Apollo cabin, a weird buzzing feeling tripping through your
“Hey, Will.” You look up, to see Nico standing a little ways off, looking kind of uncertain. You smile, and that buzzing feeling softens into something just kind of tingly.

“Hey there Neeks, longtime no see.” Nico frowns, though he does walk a bit closer.

“Don’t call me that,” he says.

“Aw come on, that’s a pretty good nickname,” you whine as a little breeze licks by ruffling your hair. Without thinking, your hands steadily do up the last of your armors fastenings. You don’t make a move to get up though. Right now you’re more than content to sit on the steps looking up at the way Nico’s silhouetted against the evening sky.

“If you call me by a stupid nickname, I’ll call you by one too,” he says with a scowl.

“Fine by me,” you say, and you can’t help the dopey smile that spreads out across your face. Nico sighs and rolls his eyes.

“I can’t wait to kick your butt in capture the flag,” he says, and you pout.

“You should have been on my team,” you say.

“No thanks, I’d like to be on the winning team.” Nico stands for just a couple of seconds before sitting down next to you. It’s feels kind of like a victory, a tiny victory, but a victory nonetheless.

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” you say, a mischievous smile crawling across your face. Nico looks more than a little skeptical.

“Just because the seven can’t play doesn’t mean that you’ve got a chance,” he says, and you blink a few times.


“The prophecy kids aren’t allowed to play,” he says slowly.

“When was this established?” you ask. Now Nico looks at you like you’ve grown a second head.

“Well, there was a huge fight about it at dinner tonight. The Stoll brothers said it was cheating, because they were all too strong.” At your blank look, Nico seems to get worried. “Annabeth offered the option of the quest kids sitting out, just this one time. She said that the odds were already stacked heavily in red team’s favor, so it would be unfair to have all of the quest kids together on one team.”

“This happened at dinner?” you ask, and Nico nods slowly.

“Yeah, there was a girl at your table who stood up on the Stoll brother’s side and swore a lot.” That sounds like Victoria, and you know that Victoria sat next to you at dinner. After a few seconds, you realize that you don’t really remember dinner. In fact you don’t remember much of what happened today. All day you’ve been thinking about that dream, never quite able to pin it down. “Are you okay?” Nico asks. You laugh, a little nervous but still passable.

“Yeah of course. I’ve just been a little distracted.” You nudge his shoulder with your own. “Don’t think this means you’ll get the upper hand. Blue team has some tricks up their sleeves.” Nico gives you a smirk and is about to retort before someone interrupts.

“Trying to steal our star player Will? Now I know your team is in a tight spot, but that’s not very
“You’re the star player, Nico? Congrats dude.” You pat Nico on the back, hand lingering for maybe a second more than necessary, but you’re allowed to indulge yourself every once in a while.

“Yes, and we’re actually about to finalize our strategy, so if you wouldn’t mind . . .” He smiles in a way that makes him look extra punchable.

“This is my cabin Specs. If you’d like privacy I suggest you get lost.” Nico looks between the two of you for a second.

“Do you have a problem with Malcolm?” Nico asks, and you snort.

“He left me hanging,” you say.

“You never were good with dealing with rejection,” Malcolm says with a shrug and now you’re really going to punch him.

“First off,” you say, getting to your feet, “that’s not what I meant and you know it. When we played the huntresses in capture the flag, I got caught in a trap, and he literally left me hanging in the air from one of the tallest trees in the forest. He could have cut me down, but instead he just left.”

“I didn’t have time, I needed to move into the position Annabeth instructed.” He sighs like you’re making a bigger deal out of this than it needs to be, like dangling upside down for forty minutes wasn’t a traumatizing and painful experience. Like, he didn’t just opt to not inform anyone you were stuck in a gods damn tree, and your whole cabin had to search the forest for you because they thought you had died.

“Oh you didn’t have time to cut me down, but you had time to laugh.” You are so going to punch him, Oh my gods.

“I apologized afterwards, but he just won’t let it go.” Malcolm shrugs. “Between you and I,” he says, pretending to whisper with Nico, “I think he’s a little obsessed with me.” That strikes a little too close to home. You don’t really care how much he jokes about you being in love with him, but the fact that he’s joking about you being obsessed and to Nico . . . You pick up Malcolm by the straps of armor, thanking the Gods that you’re taller than him.

“Listen here you-”

“Stop it,” Nico says, cutting through the tension. He’s scowling, his hands shoved into his pocket and a dangerous edge in his eye. “You’re acting like idiots. I’m going to meet up with the rest of the team.” Just like that he stalks off.

“Well, that was interesting,” Malcolm says and you let go of him with a slight shove. He doesn’t seem much bothered though. “Looks like everything will go according to plan.” You squint at him. You know his plans. Between the son of Morpheus and that Honey kid, you had pretty decent idea of their strategy skeleton. You’re not quite sure how this fits into his plans.

“Plan all you want, we’ve got more than enough surprises to throw you for a loop,” you bite back. Malcolm adjusts his glasses.

“Well, I’ll admit all of the minor gods and goddesses were unforeseen, but they’re hardly of much consequence.” You make a note to shoot him in the face. A little maiming would be well worth
losing your desert privileges.

“Do you get something out of this?” you ask, because at this point, it’s ridiculous. “I mean coming here and harassing me like this.”

“Annabeth handed over the organization of this match to me. I’m just trying my best, like everyone else,” he says with a nonchalant wave of his hand. “This could probably be considered . . . an auxiliary form of verification. And besides, messing with your head can’t really hurt our chances.”

You wonder, not for the first time, if this is more than just some game to him. “Your team is bad enough as it is, but I don’t like to take chances.”

“Listen, and listen closely.” You straighten up to your full height. “I don’t give a blistering bleeding fuck about what you think about my team. It won’t change the fact that you’re going to get your ass handed to you.” There’s a lot more you want to say to him, but Lou told you to hurry and you care more about showing up late than you do about entertaining this prick. “See ya.” You turn around and grab your helmet.

“Good luck Will,” he says. “May the best team win.”

“We will.” You can hear him huff an irritated breath, but you’re already too far away for him to try and get the last word without seeming desperate. It’s a little victory, but you’ll take it.

. . .

You are posted on patrol duty, guarding your flag in the intermediate space between the rear guard and the river guard. The river is guarded by the Nike counselor and four of your most talented siblings positioned in trees. It’s a thin guard, but probably the best suited. If everything goes according to plain, the invading parties should only have two options. One, go head to head with the Nike counselor, backed by the best archers in Apollo, or two, try and slip around the thick forest edge. You’ve set up your defenses so that a mass of trap filled trees and thickets separate one crossing from the other. If anyone wants to your flag they’ll have a tough time.

Your defense was set up this way to match the red team’s offense strategy. They’re trying to pull a fairly basic bait and switch. While one large and powerful attack force, stocked full of Ares kids, takes on your defense at its strongest point, a smaller, faster force slips around the edges. It’s probably the oldest trick in the book, and its effectiveness hinges on the fact that it usually comes as a surprise. However, your team’s seen it coming. By placing the Nike kid at the river, the Ares kids will probably rather try and fight than simply dodge around him. After all, they’re not supposed to go for the flag, they’re a distraction. Your siblings will pick off any stragglers, preventing anyone clever enough to try and sip by from getting too far away.

That should keep them busy long enough for your grab force, the other two Nike kids, Lou Ellen, and Connor Stoll, to sprint through their defenses and grab the flag almost unnoticed. You also have two other decoy forces, made up of mostly Hermes kids, though there’s a few of your siblings tucked here and there.

Meanwhile, you play “middle guard”, or rather “look for their sneak force and stop it before it can get in”. All of the traps will mean that the attack force has to make a wide arc if they want to get around to the flag, stuck harmlessly in a tree about fifty feet up. You’ll catch them, needless to say. Even if they somehow go wide enough to slip around you, your little brother Birdy is a guard in the
tree. He’s got a whistle just as loud as yours, eyes twice as sharp and ears that could hear a pin drop in grand central. You’ll know if anyone gets within fifty feet of the tree, and be there to catch them.

“There’s something wrong.” The son of Erebus is at your side, twisting his sword into the ground.

“What do you mean?” Cecil’s in your middle guard too. He’s one of Hermes’ best sword fighters, and in the event of a brawl it’ll be up to him to keep you and the Erebus kid from getting beat to a pulp.

“The shadows are unsteady,” he says in a hoarse dry voice, “Something has gone wrong.” You take a couple of arrows out of your quiver, holding them just in case you have to fire quickly.

“Thank you for being so clear. I really understand what you mean now,” Cecil says rolling his eyes. You elbow him in the side.

“What he meant to ask was, what kind of wrong?” You watch as the son of Erebus drops his sword and kneels down on the ground, hands pressed flat.

“I made a link to everyone’s shadows.” He closes his eyes, brow furrowing in concentration. “No one on our side has moved, but there’s-” A shrill whistle cuts through the air, just a long piercing whine.

“The signal that someone’s got the flag.” You don’t quite believe it. There should have been a warning sign or something, anything.

“Shadow travel.” The son of Erebus’ whisper is so soft, you almost don’t hear it.

“Nico.” His name comes out more a curse than anything, but you don’t have much time to think. Instead you let out a return whistle, letting your brother know you’re on it. “Follow me, he won’t have enough energy to try and slip through the river block, so he’ll have to head our way.” However, before you can run, the son of Erebus grabs your arm.

“He’s coming to us,” he says. “He’s using the shadows to move. We won’t be able catch him unless we can break up the shadows.” How the fuck are you supposed to do that? This is hopeless. After all the planning and work everything is just going to slip through the cracks. If only you could come up with something. You have time, but you don’t know. You just don’t know.

*Look now, look. Let knowledge immortal fill you, look-*

A searing pain shoots through your head, and brings you to your knees. The world goes black for a moment, and you clutch at you head, trying to bring it back into focus.

“Will?” Cecil is at your side but you can hardly feel him there. It’s like you’ve detached from your body, but the pain in your head is so real.

*From your hands . . . yes . . . from your hands celestial-*
“He’s here,” the son of Erebus says. You can feel it for an instant, like time grinds to a halt. The temperature seems to drop, and the stars grow a little dimmer. You remember, for a moment, Ester, and what she said.

*It feels like telling a secret.*

Something seems to click in your head, like love at first sight. You reach forward, and imagine you’re holding Nico’s wrist. Inside your chest you let your soul open up, like you were going to read someone’s life. Then you start thinking. You think about being claimed, about shitty tube popsicles on unbearably hot summer days, Nico smiling at a bad joke you made, hitting your first bulls-eye and the first time you heard Kyla sing. It’s funny, how you think about all of those things, but not so distinctly. More than memories, they’re like a heap of broken images. You can feel them, and you can imagine a light inside your body, passing through those shards like stained glass. It’s growing strong, stronger, you can feel it pulsing through your arms, radiating out to your fingertips until . . .

“Holy shit?” Your eyes snap open to see a winding trail of gold light arcing out from your hand, twisting into the shadows like the path of a breeze. Cecil’s jaw has dropped, but you don’t have time to think. You move the light on instinct, looking for a signature darkness you know. Your light attacks it, wrapping itself around the shadows until they stutter to a halt and fall apart at the seams. Nico grunts, and comes tumbling out of the darkness, a bright blue flag in his hand. “Holy shit!” Cecil says again, pumping his fist in the air. You relax for just a moment, thinking that you’ve won this battle. You’ve caught Nico; that was their ace in the hole.

However, it seems that you’ve underestimated Nico’s survival instincts. His movements are as liquid as shadows are. You realize half a second too late that Nico didn’t just tumble out of the shadows, he hit the ground rolling, and came out of it just as fast. Nico’s not the fastest kid you’ve ever known, but he connects so well that before you know what’s happening he’s back on his feet and is running through the forest.

“Holy shit!” Cecil is the first to snap out of it, sprinting off after Nico, and you’re not far behind. The son of Erebus doesn’t give chase and instead he sits down on the ground, and presses his hands to the dark earth. You manage to catch up to Cecil, drawing your bow as you go. You’re absolute shit at firing while running, but this is a straight shot. Something catches your feet and you stumble, pitching forward into the stones littered there.

“Shit!” Cecil stops to help you up. Just ahead you can see Nico turn his head and look at you, before changing course. There’s a thick grove of trees up ahead, and underneath their branches, it’s almost pitch black. *He’s going to shadow travel again.* You manage to get your arm up and shoot a beam of light forward without thinking, hoping beyond hope that you’ll get there before Nico does. But no, it doesn’t look like you’re going to make it. You’re just behind, and he’s almost there and . . . And then the shadow on the tree seems to move, jumping to the side just a bit. Nico falters and slows down just enough for your light to outpace him and banish the shadow for good.

Nico goes face first into the tree. Even from all the way where you are, you can hear his string of curses. You’re pretty sure it’s Italian too. “Come on man, now’s our chance.” Cecil heaves you off the ground and sets you on your feet.


“I know right? It’s awesome, see check this out.” Whatever he’s about to do, you stop him.
“Show me later, we have to catch Nico.” By now Nico has gotten over what was probably a mild concussion, and is turning around to run once again. You and Cecil give chase, again, and you can slowly feel that you’re running out of time. On your right you can hear the clashing sounds of steel against steal and messy shouts. The creek is so close now; you can almost see it, Nico’s almost there. You draw your bow again, notching a single arrow into it. You draw the bow back, and try your best to take a deep breath while running as fast as you can. *It’s just a stunt arrow.* You think. *All it’ll do is knock him down.* You draw the bow back a little further and stop running. He’s a foot away from the creek now.

You let the arrow fly.

The shot goes wide, buffing Nico’s shoulder just enough to send him tumbling to the ground. From the other side of the creek, you can see Lou Ellen hurtling your way. All she needs is another five seconds. Nico keeps rolling.

He’s right back on his feet.

Lou splashes across the creek.

For a second, you think it might be the first draw you’ve ever seen.

The blue flag flaps in the wind before a bright red ripples across. On the other side of the creek you can hear a cacophony of cheers. A few campers come bursting out of the woods. They jump up and down, pumping their weapons in the air. You watch for a moment, they way they envelop Nico into their fold, and you can’t really bring yourself to be angry about losing.

You look up to see Lou slouching towards you. She drops the red flag to the ground. “Sorry, I was this close,” she says and then just sighs.

“It was my bad too,” you say, “I had a clear shot and I missed it.” Cecil socks you on the shoulder.

“Come on man, you’re not exactly the best archer in Apollo. Besides, I’m sure it was hard to shoot at the love of your life.” You elbow him in the side.

“Shut up man.” Still, there’s a smile on your face.

“Nico!” Jason is the first through the foliage, followed by Piper, Percy and Annabeth.

“We saw the whole thing!” Piper claps her hands together. You let your attention wander for half a second, and study the way Nico’s mouth quirks up, just a tiny bit.

“Come on,” you say, once the rest of the red team starts to surround Nico, “we’d better go meet up with the rest of our team.” Lou and Cecil agree, and together you walk down the little creek to where Pax, the son of Nike had kept up his defense. You almost laugh when they come into view.

Pax is sitting on a rock while Ester fusses over him. It seems he got a little cut on his forehead. She
seems utterly unconcerned about the dozen Ares and other assorted campers lying unconscious around the creek. Looks like the infirmary is going to be busy again.

“Will!” Chloe clambers down from her tree, followed shortly by Victoria and the twins. “So?” she asks and you shake your head.

“By this much though.” You make the tiniest space between your fingers possible, and that, at least, makes her laugh.

“Good! I’m glad you at least gave them a beating.” She puts her hands on her hips, smiling brightly.

“This isn’t what you’d call a beating?” you ask, gesturing to the unconscious campers. The twins laugh at that.

“We hardly did a single thing,” Jamie says, and Devereux nods emphatically.

“You should have seen Pax man, kid’s a fucking whirlwind.” Victoria waves her hands around in the air.

“I think he’s older than you, you shouldn’t call him a kid,” Devereux says, and Victoria elbows him.

“That’s not the point,” she insists. The rest of your team slowly gathers around. There’s some laughing and some joking. The Stoll brothers declare that we won anyways because we looked cooler while doing it. You notice that Landon has crept up out of the corner of your eye.

“That was you, wasn’t it?” you ask while Travis Stoll is giving a gripping account of how one child of Demeter got caught in one of their traps. Landon raises his eyebrow in silent question. “The shadow thing.” He nods slowly.

“I’m not very good,” he says, “But I can move the shadows. I know wherever there is darkness.”

“Thank you,” you say, and he shrugs.

“It’s nothing.” You look at your hands and think that it wasn’t nothing. It was another chance to win, and you ended up botching it, but you guess that’s just the way things work out sometimes.

“I’m going to head out,” you tell Lou and Cecil. They nod to you.

“Oh, don’t forget to show Lou the thing sometime,” Cecil says before you go, and you nod. Lou frowns.

“Show me what? What is it?” Cecil just shakes his head.

“It’s something you’ve got to see to believe.” Lou does not like that answer at all.

“What? No, tell me! Hey Will, get back here! Tell me!” You scurry off before you’ll be forced to try and replicate that again. Now that it’s all past you’re not sure if you even could do it again. That strange voice echoes in your head, no words, just the feel of it. Your arms feel kind of tingly, and you wonder, cupping your hands together, if you could do it.

“Hey Spooks, I thought I told you no more Underworld magic.” Nico just kind of shrugs and walks along side of you.
“I think you’re just a sore loser, Sunshine.” You stop dead in your tracks, staring at him.

“Did you just call me Sunshine?” you ask, face completely straight. Nico sputters, his ears pink.

“Well you called me Spooks. I told you I’d start giving you stupid nicknames if you kept giving me ones.” He shoves his hands into his pockets, and then turns on his heels. It’s doesn’t take much to catch up to him considering how much longer your legs are.

“I like it,” you say, and that only causes Nico to turn a brighter shade of red.

“That’s because you’re an idiot,” he huffs.

“Whatever, you say Death Boy.” Nico jabs you in the side, and it makes you wince and laugh at the same time. “Brilliant nicknames aside, aren’t you kind of missing out on your victory party?” You hook a thumb over your shoulder at the forest. Here and there clumps of kids are starting to trail back to their cabins.

“There were a lot of people,” he says and looks up at the sky, “it’s not really my thing.” You nod, and let the conversation drop for there. You’re a little tired and you like the way you can walk together alone like this. It’s comfortable, and you like being able to look at Nico in the moonlight, underneath the stars. “Can I ask you a question?” Nico says, releasing the sky from his gaze so he can look you in the eye.

“Sure.” Nico’s been looking you in the eye more often, you realize. Part of you worries about what might happen to your heart if it keeps beating out of your chest like this, but most of you hopes you never have to look away. Nico looks away, kicking a little rock out into the grass.

“That light thing you did . . .” He doesn’t quite finish his sentence, but you kind of understand.

“I know,” you say, “but I also . . . I don’t know, like at all.” At that, Nico looks back up at you, but you’re too busy staring at the stars. “I talked to a bunch of the children of lesser gods and asked them to join my team a couple days ago. There was one girl, Ester. She’s a daughter of the star goddess Asteria. Anyway, she showed me this thing she could do, like making fireflies or stars. She said that since I was a son of Apollo, I could probably do something like that too.” You look away from the stars, and back at Nico. He nods, waiting for you to continue. Your steps have become noticeably slower, just barely ambling along. “Then I had this weird dream. I don’t really remember much but . . . I did remember it, kind of, and I kind of just thought and I did the thing, like I do when I checked your pulse, and then” you sweep your hands out, “light.”

“For a child of the god of poetry, you’re not very good with words,” Nico says, and you smirk at him.

“Yeah, well we can’t all be embodiments of our godly parentage, you walking skeleton.” Nico just rolls his eyes. Too soon, you’ve come to a stop at your cabin. You just lean against its side. “Hey Nico?” He hasn’t made a move to walk back to his cabin yet, and at your question he just makes a gruff noise. “Are you okay?” you ask, “I mean, after shadow traveling?” Nico shrugs, and looks at the ground.

“Yeah,” he says, toeing at the earth with the tip of his ratty black sneakers.

“You’d tell me if you weren’t though, right?” He looks up from the ground, frowns and then looks back down at the ground. His shoulders are tense, and maybe he’s kicking the ground with a little more force than is absolutely necessary.

“I feel fine,” he says. That’s not really what you meant, but for now, you suppose there’s no point in
“Good,” you say, and you start to hum something. You’re not entirely sure what it is, but you think you might like it. Nico fidgets, running his hand through his hair, adjusting his clothes, and moving his fingers in short little agitated movements.

“Night,” he says after a minute.

“Goodnight Nico,” you say, “sleep tight.” He looks back at you with a smirk that's more rueful than anything.

“Yeah,” he says, like he finds that idea funny, “you too.” You watch him wander off, across the empty fields to his empty cabin.

“Oi, sir broods a lot.” Victoria comes skipping across grass, followed by a collection of your other siblings.

“Hey shrimpy.” You ruffle her hair and she groans.

“Shut up.” The twins laugh at her, which only prompts her to try and chase them around.

“Hey Kyla,” you call. She jogs over to you. “Did anyone make sure to get Birdy out of the tree?” You ask, and she pales for a moment, before you hear a whistle. Behind her, your little brother trots over. “Woah, did you get down all by yourself?” he shakes his head.

“I had to help.” One of your other little sisters, Ren, plods over and Birdy nods his head emphatically. “Can we go inside now? I’m tired.” You laugh.

“Yeah, kid. I think we’re all tired.” Everyone tries to rush the door at once, so you decide to hang back, and look down at the Hades cabin again. You know it’s silly, but you can’t help but worry about Nico. You look up at the sky, and wonder how many constellations he knows.

“But I’m trying hard to know what is meant when we claim O silent night,” Austin thumps you gently on the back of your head, looking back at the forest, before throwing an arm over your shoulder in a way that's meant to be more comforting than jostling, “A night like this, when blown out is all the blaze of the sky but not heat, not dampness either, not even that star, alone, like a crack in the firmament.”

“No,” you say, looking down at your hands, “I think there’s a little something to be found tonight, at least a star or two.” Austin raises an eyebrow, then looks over at the Hades cabin.

“Fish for fallen light, with patience,” he says, and you smile.

“I am the very definition of patience,” you say. In the palm of your hand, you think you see a spark.

Chapter End Notes

So like 90% of this chapter was inspired by cherryandsisters on tumblr and her awesome headcannon that Will has cool light powers, and all of the cool fanart that it inspired. That was just a brilliant idea, I absolutely love it. Any time I had thought about the way Will might use photokinesis, it was always in a “flash bang” kind of way, but when I saw the ribbons and the way the light twisted in her artwork I was so floored. It was just
absolutely gorgeous. I guess you could say this chapter was dedicated to her, if it wasn't such a paltry dedication.

Austin’s words come from:

Rickey Laurentiis, “Crescendo,” jubilat (No. 18)
Pablo Neruda, from The Sea and the Bells (Copper Canyon Press, 2002)

I know a few people legitimately wanted Reyna to give Nico the talk, so I might write that chapter later and shove in-between here as a kind of bonus chapter. It wasn't really all that plot relevant, so I've skipped over it in favor of trying to get a handle on this story's pacing.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

This is so late I don't even have an excuse. Anyway here's Wonderwall.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nico is still very bad at archery, and surprise surprise, you still find it very endearing.

“Relax your shoulders,” you tell him, stepping up while he draws his arrow. He starts, but doesn’t fire the arrow, which you take as an improvement.

“What?” he asks, looking over his shoulder at you through messy black fringe like the wings of a crow. If it gets much longer, he’s going to need to put it in a ponytail or something.

“You want to keep tension in your arms, but you can afford to relax your shoulders a bit. If you’re too stiff it’ll be difficult to fire the arrow.” You hold your hands up for a moment, before pointing at him, asking silent permission to fix his form. He hesitates, before nodding slowly. You approach him carefully, like any fast movement might scare him off. “Alright notch your arrow.” He does so, and just like before his arms go rigid and his shoulders hunch up. You press on them gently, and after a few seconds he relaxes. Your fingers move along his left arm, lowing it just a bit, tilting his wrist and setting everything just right.

“Is this really necessary?” he asks. His cheeks are red, but that could easily be because of the sun.

“Trust me, I’m a doctor,” you say with a smile and he rolls his eyes.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” he mutters, but you just continue right along.

“Try firing now,” you say. His chest rises with a deep slow breath, and as he lets it out the arrow goes flying. It pierces the target in the ring just outside the bulls-eye.

“Wow,” he says turning to you, with barely restrained awe darting across his eyes. Your heart thumps a little louder in your chest.

“Yeah,” you say, “you’re a natural.” He rolls his eyes at that and gently socks you in the shoulder.

“Says the son of Apollo.” He looks at the ground and scuffs his shoe against the dusty brown earth.

“I mean it.” You bump his shoulder with your own. “I didn’t even have to tell you how to breathe, but you did it just like a professional would.”

“You’re too nice,” he says, and you shake your head.

“Says you.” That seems to ruffle Nico’s feathers.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks, putting a hand on his hip.

“Just that for all you pretend to be a grump, you’re a big softie on the inside,” you say with a wicked
smile.

“Am not!” He throws his bow at you.

“Are too!” You dodge it.

“Am not!” He looks like he’s about to summon skeletons.

“Fine, you’re not.” You hold your hands up in defeat.

“I’m not,” he says again.

“I believe you,” you say, though there’s still a smile on your lips. He looks at you, then down at the ground.

“You’re an idiot,” he says finally, peeking at you through his fringe. His cheeks are red, and this time you’re sure it’s not just the sun at work.

The second Capture the Flag game ends up as little more than a rematch, except this time the seven are included. As one would expect, they’re fantastic and they kill. But your team’s not so bad either. The kid from Nike ends up going head to head with Percy, and although he ends up completely soaked and bruised from head to toe, Pax manages to keep the son of the sea god busy, at least long enough for you to slip through his guard and across the stream. Wherever Jason and Annabeth are, you’re sure they’re causing your team trouble, but you’ve got bigger things to worry about.

“Do you really want to take the flag?” Piper asks, batting her eyes. You can tell by the way her words resonate around your head that she’s charm speaking, but you don’t feel a thing. “Wouldn’t you rather stay here with me?”

“Nope.” You bash her with your shield and send her toppling down the side of Zeus’s Fist. “For future reference, that angle’s not going to work on me.” She blinks back at you from the ground, a small smile itching at the corner of her mouth.

“I know,” she says. Piper doesn’t make a move to get up, so you decide now would be a good time to take the flag and run. You don’t get very far.

“Step aside Nico.” The flag in your hand shifts awkwardly as you try to find a way to carry it and draw your sword and hold your shield. Nico looks back at you with the gleam of something wicked in his eye.

“Make me.” It’s embarrassing how much those two words affect you.

Needless to say, you don’t win that match.
It’s the middle of the week, and you would have never thought that New York could give Southern California a run for its money when it comes to heat waves, but the thermometer outside the Big House reads eighty-seven and it’s barely past nine o’clock.

“And lastly, I would like to caution all campers in regards to their conduct this morning. Treat yourselves with care today. I will be announcing a special surprise for this afternoon. It would not do for you to injure yourself,” Chiron says with a wide wave of his hand. You turn to look at Kyla.

“Wonder what kind of surprise,” you mutter, secretly hoping it’s popsicles because you really, really, want a popsicle right now.

“I’m more worried about what that means for us.” She hooks a thump over her shoulder at Austin, who sighs and puts his head in his hand. “We had infirmary duty today. This is going to be so boring and stuffy.”

“What will I do now? What shall I do?” Austin flicks a piece of his breakfast across the table. It lands in Victoria’s drink, but she’s too busy getting into a fight with the twins to notice.

“I’ll take infirmary duty.” The tips of your fingers itch, but you try to assuage it by tapping them on the table. It’s probably just the heat. Kyla studies you with narrowed eyes.

“Didn’t we have arts and crafts with Hermes and Hecate today?” You did, but you think a little investigation into your powers is more important than watching Lou Ellen infect everything with glitter and Cecil steal all the popsicle sticks and bronze wire.

“It’s fine. I have readings to do. Chiron found me an old medical text that was actually written by a demigod who worked with children of Hades and other underworld magic users. Plus I’m dying for air conditioning,” you say, and it’s not a total lie. Chiron did give you a new text recently, but you can always read that before you go to bed. Kyla buys the lie instantly, and you know she’s excited to do arts and crafts with Lou. Austin gives you a long lingering look.

“Hey, who the Hades got bread in my cup?” Victoria shrieks, and Austin’s immediately preoccupied with trying to seem innocent.

A thin slip of light squeezes between the thick curtains barricading the infirmary from the midday sun outside. You beckon it forward with just a twitch of your fingers. It shivers, bending just slightly. You mimic the motion again, thinking about happy things, about things that fill you with a fuzzy feeling. With the thick air pressing in around you, it’s hard to do, but not terribly so. The slip of light jumps just a bit, stretching out towards you. However, as much as you repeat the motion, you don’t get much farther than that. Instead of thinking of happy things, you think as you did when you had held Nico’s hand and searched for the darkness inside him. You take a deep breath, closing your eyes for a second as something inside opens up. Ribbons of gold start to wind their way out of your fingertips. The light from the window seems drawn to your own light, slowly lifting up from the floor and reaching out across the shadows. Your own gold light connects with the pale daylight in a strike like lightning. Daylight arcs around your own beam in tight loops before branching across your hand, to skitter up your arm.

As the ribbons twirl around your fingers, a deep gold begins to blend into the pale daylight, turning it languid and curving. You watch it move against your skin, a heat like someone’s hand or the taste of ambrosia, lingering wherever that gold light moves.
“That is so weird,” Cecil says from your shoulder, and immediately the spell is broken. The daylight snaps back to its sliver and your sparks die out, dissipating against your skin. A light warmth lingers in your finger tips, but you can hardly notice it. “This is weird. This whole sitting in the dark thing, it's weird.”

“I’m not good at controlling it yet,” you say, “it’s easier if there’s not a lot of light to work with. Besides, if I’m on infirmary duty, I might as well practice.” Cecil doesn’t say anything. Instead he reaches for the nearest lamp and clicks on the light. The infirmary is empty. It has been all day. You would have found it eerie if you hadn’t been so focused on practicing.

“Where is everyone? Don’t you usually have a pretty steady stream of kids hurting themselves?” Cecil asks, checking out the abandoned beds.

“I guess everyone’s been pretty cautious since Chiron mentioned that surprise at breakfast this morning,” you say spinning around in your desk chair.

“It had better not be another prophecy of doom, or I swear I’m going to just quit this whole demigod thing and become a jewel thief,” Cecil gripes, reaching under one of the nearest beds and pulling out a watch that someone had apparently lost and was now never going to get back.

“Can’t be a prophecy,” you say, heading towards the door.

“Prophesy stuff still being weird?” he asks, and you nod.

“The last time I had a dream it was just . . . a bunch of mumbling, I don’t even remember. Most nights it’s just blank. You’ve got to admit that’s weird, especially for kids of Apollo.” You exit the infirmary, Cecil in toe, and are temporarily blinded by the sunlight. Cecil laughs at your flailing, and once your eyes have adjusted, you smack him on the arm.

“Ow hey, calm down. I need that arm to deal with whatever surprise this is.” He rubs the spot and pouts, but you roll your eyes.

“You’ll be fine.”

At the lunch there is an eerie susurrus ebbing and flowing across the pavilion like the push and pull of waves against the beach. Every time Chiron so much as reaches a hand out to take his goblet, all of the voices cut out, only to rise again with whispers of, “what do you think that means”, “what is the surprise” and “when will he tell us”? Even your own siblings are showing a degree of nervousness. Birdy sits right beside you, whistling quietly under his breath. It’s just faint enough for you to hear, and you recognize it as ‘I can go the distance’ from the Hercules movie. Victoria is eating too quickly. She’ll get hiccups, or worse, be finished before the announcement, and then she’ll start picking fights just to bide the time.

“The dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief. The Naiad ‘mid her reeds pressed her cold finger closer to her lips,” Austin mutters under his breath, eyes scanning the pavilion.

Finally, Chiron stands, and everyone takes in a short breath at once. He holds the anticipation of the entire room with a single open palm.

“I know how you all have waited for this, so I will do my best no to try your patience. As some of you may know, many years ago this camp held yearly trireme battles on the canoe lake. After much debating and deliberating, we have decided that we will once again be holding these battles.” A hundred conversations break out at once, shaking the once silent air.

“Trireme battles?”
“Like Capture the Flag?”

“Or cabin against cabin?”

“Do we get to choose sides?”

“Are we assigned?”

The questions are rattled off, one after the other. Sometimes they are aimed at Chiron, but more often than not they’re aimed at other campers, as each looks for a way to express their disbelief to others. You yourself are more than a little overwhelmed.

“This is going to be awesome!” you say, elbowing Austin, and he nods.

“The air does laugh with our merry wit and the green hill laughs with the noise of it!” He pumps his fist in the air, and while you’re not entirely sure what that means, you think it’s probably something good, so you nod. On your other side, you feel a tug and look down to see Birdy frowning.

“What’s up kid?” you ask, ruffling his hair lightly. He points across the pavilion, where a hand rises above the Athena table like the sole tree in a lightning storm. Not a moment later, Chiron is quelling the general clamor and calling on the Athena table. Annabeth rises with a slight grimace on her face.

“I don’t mean to be a downer, but... Well last time we held trireme battles things didn’t exactly go well.” A few of the oldest kids nod, Drew Tanaka from Aphrodite, Clarisse and one of her brothers, Cecil and the Stoll brothers, and lastly Pollux, from Dionysus. Kyla and Austin look at you, but you can only shake your head. The incident with the trireme happened before you got here, all you know is that it involved one of the triremes going up in smoke.

“I know things got a bit... out of control last time, but I assure you that steps have been taken to keep things under control this time. You need not worry Annabeth.” She doesn’t look at all assuaged, but she sits down anyway. Clarisse stands up without waiting to be called on.

“Are we going to divvy it up like last time?” she asks, and Chiron shakes his head.

“Ah, no. This time we will have mixed ships, so children from different cabins may be on the same ships. We hope that this will discourage cabin rivalries and encourage fair play.” You get the feeling that the ships going up in smoke last time had something to do with the Hermes kids, but you keep that to yourself. “Each trireme will be manned by a maximum of twenty one campers and a minimum of eleven. At the head of each ship there will be a triarch, or captain. Trierarch positions will be assigned on a first come first serve basis.

“We will be posting signup sheets in the big house,” Chiron continues, “Please sign up promptly. The trireme battle will begin this afternoon at five o’clock sharp and last until one side has won, or the sun has set. As is the case with Capture the Flag, all intentional maiming will result in the loss of desert privileges. Drowning is considered a form of maiming. And please,” he gives the Hermes cabin a sharp look, “wait until the signal to begin any sort of interaction with the other teams. There will be absolutely no ‘preemptive defenses’, ‘insurance plans’ or ‘surprise fireworks’ of any kind this time.” The Stoll brothers both sag in their seats. “Also,” and this time he looks over at the Ares cabin, “if you do not know how to swim. I encourage you to not participate. I repeat. If you do not know how to swim, please do not sign up. There were be viewing benches erected on the shores so you can watch.” Clarisse’s brother looks down at his plate, the tips of his ears red. “If you are under the age of ten, you may not participate either.

“Lastly, I would like to inform you that the sign-up sheet for ships has already been posted. As soon
as you are done with your lunch, please calmly go into the Big House and make your choice.” As would be expected, nobody waits until they’re finished with their lunch and no one moves calmly. Everyone rushes the Big House at once despite Chiron’s loud protests and Mr. D’s snarky comments. You get a bit of a late start to the rush because someone elbows you in the face, but you’ve got long legs and you easily overtake all of the younger kids. Over your head, you see Jason fly by.

“Fuck Jason,” you mutter as you slip underneath an Ares’ kid’s outstretched arm, narrowly avoiding taking another elbow to the face.

“What about fucking Jason?” Cecil appears at your side, moving like the crowd doesn’t even faze him. In front of you the rush of bodies is starting to stagnate.

“No, like fuck Jason,” you say.

“I thought you liked Nico, though.”

“Okay first, shut up. Second, I mean like in a middle finger kind of way, not in an ‘I’d suck his dick’ kind of way.”

“Will!” The little brunette in front of you turns out to be Lou and she is not as pleased to see you as you are to see her. “Why are you shouting about sucking dick in a crowd like this? There are children here.”

“Cecil asked.”

“Will answered.” She promptly flicks both of you in the forehead.

“Focus you idiots.” With that she begins to move again, slipping through the crowd here and there. You manage to follow in her footsteps most of the time, but Lou is a much smaller person than you are, and it’s easy for her to weave between people. However, you have little compunction about pushing and shoving, so in the end everything evens out. At the sign up board, there are mostly empty spaces.

“Where should we join?” Lou asks, looking over all of the names arranged under little headings that say “boat one, boat two, boat three,” and so on. Down the center there’s a thick black line separating one team from the other.

“Just pick an empty one,” you say, and she does, writing your name in first. “Hey wait, why did you put me in the captain slot?”

“You don’t want to be the captain?” she asks, giving you a critical look that suggests she thinks you’re lying.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You love to be in charge of things,” she says plainly, and you can feel the tips of your ears heating up. “Plus you’re a control freak.”

“I am not.” You take the pencil from her and erase your name from the captain’s slot to prove a point. “Besides it doesn’t matter. It’s not like being in charge of the boat will change that much. Just let someone else be captain. We’ll be fine.” Lou gives you one last look before conceding.

“Alright,” she says, “if you say so.”
The slosh of your oar against the lake surface comes and goes as your arms pump up and down and
around. The temperature had climbed steadily throughout the day, but there is a continuous breeze
out here on the lake. It tangles its fingers in your hair and whips the drops of sweat from your skin as
your ship moves forward. Perhaps you would be more thankful for it in other situations.

This was a mistake, you realize, as you try to focus on the movement of your oars. Cecil is seated
right behind you, and Lou is on your right. Your little brother Birdy is sitting a little ways in front of
you, valiantly trying to keep up with the other kids. This was a terrible, horrible mistake. If looks
could kill, that glare Lou is currently sending you would have you swimming with the fishes.

“Lou Ellen, please keep your eyes forward, and focus on the task at hand.” Malcolm is slowly
walking up and down the boat isle, doing his absolute best to be the absolute worst trierarch. As
soon as he passes, she looks at you again, glaring with every ounce of her being. Your fault, she
mouths, and gives Malcolm a pointed look. You hang your head. Really, at this point you should
have known that the fates hate you. You focus on watching your oar cut through the water, dipping
down below the surface of the lake, and then cutting back up again.

“Excuse me, what is your name?” You barely pay Malcolm any attention until someone whistles at
him in reply. “Please use your words. That’s incredibly childish of you.” You look over to see
Malcolm talking to your little brother Birdy. Birdy only whistles at him again.

“He’s mute,” you say, before Malcolm has a chance to respond, “he can’t actually talk. He likes to
use whistles as short hand codes because he usually has his hands full, and can’t sign.” Birdy nods
and wiggles the oar around for emphasis.

“If he’s mute then why can he whistle?” Malcolm looks like he thinks he’s outsmarted you.

“Because air can still go in and out of his lungs, you idiot.” You cease turning your oar, partly
because you’re tired of rowing, and partly because you’re tired of Malcolm’s shit.

“Whatever, get back to rowing.” He waves dismissive hand and turns his back to you.

“No.” Maybe it’s the heat, but you’re just dying to blow off steam too. “We haven’t had a break in
forty minutes and we’ve just been rowing around in circles. The games haven’t even started yet.”

“We are practicing quick directional changes.”

“Yeah, see that’s bullshit. You just like ordering people around.”

“I get to give orders. I’m the trierarch.” He speaks slowly, as one would to a child.

“You make that sound like a fact.” You take slow, sure steps until you’re standing within strangling
distance. Malcolm scoffs, adjusting his glasses.

“Of course it is. What are you going to do,” he asks, “mutiny?”

You know, logically, that ‘fuck it’ is not an emotion, but you’re pretty sure you can feel it right now.

“Yes,” you say, before shoving Malcolm as hard as you can, sending him toppling over the edge of
the boat. Malcolm makes a mighty splash. There’s a beat of silence before Lou and Cecil bolt to their feet, pumping their fists in the air.

“Fuck yeah, we’re pirates!” Cecil says.

“What?” you ask. Not that you’ve thought about it a lot, but the logical conclusion to mutiny, doesn’t seem like it should be piracy.

“Yeah, we mutinied. Now we’re pirates. That’s how that works.” Cecil looks a little confused by your confusion, as if wondering how you couldn’t know something this crucial.

“We can’t be pirates,” you say reasonably.

“Why not?” Lou asks. You open your mouth to respond, but can’t actually think of any reason not to. “I was kind of liking the sound of pirates,” Lou says. You consider that for a moment. You hadn’t really thought about what you were going to do after you pushed Malcolm off the boat, but this sounds as good as anything. In the water beside the ship, Malcolm comes up sputtering and gasping.

“What the Hades, let’s be pirates!” You pump your fist in the air, and Lou and Cecil jump and clap.

“What?” Malcolm asks, treading water. “You can’t be pirates. This isn’t a pirate ship.” You turn to look at the other kids on your boat.

“All in favor of saying ‘fuck it’ and becoming pirates?” you ask. Lou pumps her fist in the air.

“Fuck it!” There’s a slight pause followed by an enthusiastic but uncoordinated series of “Fuck it!”

“All in favor of Will becoming captain?” Cecil shouts.

“Aye!” This time your crew is in absolute, perfect harmony.

“Allright, then. My first order as captain is for someone to fish Malcolm out of the water and tie him up,” you say, turning to the ship prow and grabbing one of the spare rope coils. To your surprise, Miranda Gardiner is the one who take the coil from your hand. One of the larger kids hauls Malcolm up over the side of the boat, and she takes the liberty of tying him tightly.

“Miranda?!” he protests, but she just shushes him.

“I love you sweetie, but you’re a tyrant.” She kisses him on the cheek and then promptly removes the bandanna wrapped around her head to gag him.

“What is your first order of business, Captain?” Cecil asks. You pause, thinking for a few seconds.

“All right, how about this, you two,” You to Lou and Cecil, “will be my first mates. Birdy, you’ll be the lookout. Someone help him climb up the mast.” The same kid who pulled Malcolm out of the water, grabs Birdy, and manages to get him up in the mast. “Same signals as Capture the Flag, please.” Birdy gives you one short whistle in replace of a yes. Off in the distance, a flare snakes up into the sky.

“The starting signal!” Lou says.

“Well then, I guess that’s our cue!” You smile, pointing towards the nearest ship. “Attack!”
The first ship you run right into doesn’t know what’s happening until Lou’s already subdued their captain.

“Join us or forfeit!” she says, using the point of her sword to lift his chin. Beside her, Cecil lights a firecracker and holds it precariously near the sails.

“What’s going on?” he asks, looking at you all like you’re crazy.

“I am the Dread Pirate Roberts, and these are my first makes,” you say, stepping onto the boat.

“Pirates?” the kid asks, and you nod. He looks at the point of Lou’s sword, the fire cracker, and you.

“Tick tock,” Cecil says with a smile.

“Alright, I'll join,” he says. You nod and Lou lowers the point of her sword. Cecil lobs his firecracker at the nearest enemy ship, scaring the shit out of all the campers on board.

“Cecil, you take over as captain of this ship,” you say, leaping over the side back to your ship.

“Come on Lou!” You hold your hand out to help her over. She frowns.

“Why can’t I be captain?” she asks, but takes your hand and leaps the side of the ship anyway.

“I’m going to need some help,” you say, pointing off to the side where Cecil threw his firecracker. Kyla is looking back, murder and amusement twisting across her features.

“Ah,” Lou replies, a look of no good mischief sliding across her face, “I’ll do my best, Captain.”

Kyla’s ship is technically the third ship you board, because some asshole decided to cut right in front of you. It didn’t matter anyways; those guys refused to surrender so you just threw their captain overboard and then proceeded to light the ship on fire (Cecil had been kind enough to leave a bottle of lighter fluid, a confetti cannon, two strings of fire crackers and half a dozen lighters in the canvas sack underneath his bench). Anyway, the point is that you’ve kind of got this whole pirate thing down pat by the time your ship rams into Kyla’s.

You leap over the gap between your prow and their middle, landing right on top of some poor oarsman. Kyla is on you in an instant, sword drawn, but before she can make a move, Lou sides between the two of you. There’s Mist swirling around her feet, twisting up her body, and reaching out towards Kyla.

“Keep us covered,” Lou whispers to you, before turning to face Kyla. “Hey there sweetheart,” Lou says, twirling her sword once. Kyla’s eyes go glassy as the Mist curls around her ankle. Your boat orientates itself, so that the ships are lined up parallel and your other crew-mates jump over.

“What . . .” Kyla’s cheeks go bright red, eyes wide as she stares at Lou. You really don’t want to know what kind of illusions Lou is trying to work right now. Thankfully, a couple of the other kids on the ship hop to their feet and a battle breaks out.

“I’ve got a proposition,” Lou says, and the Mist curls around Kyla’s wrists like shackles, “Why don’t you join me?” The glassy look fades from Kyla’s eyes a little bit as she gets her bearings.

“What exactly are you up too?” she asks.
“We’re pirates.” One of the other oarsmen sends you tumbling to the ground, but instead of actually charging Lou he runs right past her and over the side of the ship. You stare for a second before falling to the ground laughing. Kyla smiles too, looks at you, crumpled on the floor, at the confused crew-mate in the water, and then back to Lou.

“Pirates huh?” She tilts her head to the side. “Is there room for a siren?”

“Always,” Lou says, taking her hand.

“Captain!” You scramble to your feet, looking back at your ship. Malcolm had slipped his binds and gone straight overboard. “I couldn’t stop him!” Miranda says as she watches him cut through the water like a motorboat.

“Don’t worry about it,” you call. The other oarsman in front of you decides that now would be a good time to go back to fighting. “Lou, Kyla, I don’t think we’ll be taking this ship any time soon.”

“You wouldn’t want them anyway, these guys are all assholes,” Kyla chimes in, jumping the gap with Lou.

“Pull around!” Lou shouts, and a few of your other crew-mates jump back to the boat and start to turn off in a different direction. You deflect two more hits before leaping over the side. There’s a horrible second while you’re suspended in the air. The boat below you jerks, and you think your feet are going to miss. . . But you land, shaky, just shy of the boat’s lip. Something flies past your arm, tearing through cotton and soft skin before thunking into the hard wood at your feet. The spear wobbles once or twice while you stare at it, trying to fight off the first jolt of panic.

“Will!” Kyla bounds up to you, looking at the gash. “Don’t worry, it’s shallow.”

“I know,” you say, stripping off your t-shirt and tearing a strip to make a binding. Kyla helps you tie it off nice and tight before you get to your feet. She hums a little melody under her breath, and that’s enough to ease the pain. “All right crew, our next-” Your instructions are cut off by a wolf whistle.

“Nice!” Travis Stoll says, giving you a thumbs-up.

“Where did you come from?” you ask, because you are like ninety-nine percent sure that he wasn’t there when you guys set out. He jerks a thumb over his shoulder and you see another ship saddled next to you, although you’re pretty sure that gap is way too wide for any normal human being to jump. You don’t bother asking. With Hermes kids it’s generally best not to. “Why are you here?”

“You guys looked like you were doing something fun,” he says. A wicked light gleams in his eye.

“Can we join?” he asks, and judging by the look in his eye you know he won’t take no for an answer.

“Alright, but I’m the Grand Captain here.”

“Control freak~” Lou sings under her breath, and Kyla snickers. You shoot them both a glare, but that only makes them giggle more.

“That’s fine by me,” Travis says. He stands up, dusting off his pants. He turns then, to where his boat is waiting. “We’re pirates!” He calls. They cheer. You think that you’re definitely going to regret this later. However, a sharp whistle cuts through the commotion. You look up at Birdy, clinging to the mast above your head. Huh. You had almost forgot about him. You’ll worry about
your possible negligence later, when your little brother’ not waving like a mad man. Gritting your teeth, you turn to see what he’s pointing at.

Oh this can’t be good.

Out across the water, you can just make out a mass of curly blond hair and a sopping wet Malcolm.

“Captain?” Lou asks.

“It seems the navy is on to us,” you mutter, biting into your nail. “Percy’s on that ship right?” you ask, and Lou nods. “If they catch us, we’re sunk.”

“Then we won’t let them catch us,” Lou says with that look of hers, and this time you’re thankful she was raised in the Hermes cabin. “Your orders captain?”

“Trust your instincts,” you say, and Lou nods, squaring she shoulders.

“Travis!” The boy in question clacks his heels as he jumps to attention.

“Yes ma'am!”

“You wouldn’t come asking for a favor without something to offer in return,” she says, and a Cheshire smile slides across Travis’ face. “What’s up your sleeve?”

“Hmmm . . .” Travis tilts his head to the side, eyes darting over her shoulder at their newly discovered adversaries, floating passively in the bay. “Well, it seems that they’re not doing much, so let’s call this an uh . . . an insurance plan.” Lou’s eyes glitter as she takes the little bag that Travis seems to pull out of thin air. She doesn’t break eye contact though, and presses further.

“Surprise fireworks?”

“You’ve got to leave us something for ourselves.”

“Then what’ve I got?”

“Your brother drives a hard bargain.”

“Excellent.” Now she lets her eyes slip down to the bag, as her fingers loosen the drawstring. You can’t tell what’s so special about the knickknacks inside, but Lou’s smile is absolutely terrifying, so it must be something good. Another sharp whistle splits through the air, and your head snaps up to look at Birdy. He hangs precariously from the mast, signing at you so fast you almost don’t pick it up.

Annabeth is moving, but I think she’s a distraction. Another ship is coming in off the prow. On the right it looks like they’re coming, but they’re slow starting. It looks like a pincer maneuver.

“All hands on deck!” you call, spinning around, “We’re moving out. Travis, follow us, we’re going to slip past the ship off the port bow and then circle around to pick up Cecil before we confront the navy.” He nods to you, taking a long step backwards, then one more so he’s balanced on the lip of the boat.

“Aye-aye, Captain!” He holds a hand out, and from his ship someone tosses a rope out into his hand. Travis turns and leaps, swinging well over the gap and into the center of his ship. There’s another sharp whistle above your head. Birdy is pointing off to your left. The enemy ship is closing in way too fast. A Greek trireme manned by kids shouldn’t be able to move like that. The wind around you
begins to pick up, and that’s when you realize what’s going on.

“Travis!” you call, tripping over yourself in your haste to get to the edge before Travis sails out of earshot. “Jason’s on that ship. Get Cecil, and stop him!” There’s no way you can outrun that ship, but maybe you can slow it down. Still, this means you’ve got no idea how you’re going to deal with Annabeth’s ship or that other one. Ah, well, you’ll burn that bridge when you get to it.

“No holds bar, Captain?” Travis calls as his ship lurches and begins to spin around.

“Use any means necessary,” you reply. Jason can take care of himself. He’ll be fine. Probably. Okay, now that you think about it, you kind of regret saying that, but Travis is already out of range.

“Captain!” Lou throws an arm around your shoulder and drags you back into the ship. “I’ve got a plan,” she says, releasing you.

“Then do whatever it is that needs doing, because I don’t really have one, except run.” Lou nods, and fishes a white ball out of her bag. Something in the back of your head tickles, like you remember this thing, but you can’t quite place it.

“Throw this, you’ve got a better arm than me.” You take the ball from her. It’s oddly heavy, like it’s a shot put or something.

“Where?”

“That ship.” As Annabeth’s ship moves towards you, another is drifting slowly into their path. It’s not close enough to worry about a collision, but they will be passing close by. You nod, winding up your arm and lobbing it with the best of your abilities. Lou whispers something too low for you to hear, but before you get the chance to ask, the ball explodes on the other ship. White smoke rushes outward, immediately blocking Annabeth’s ship, and anything nearby for that matter, from sight. Three white birds burst from the cloud of smoke. One of them flies out across the water to land on her shoulder.

“Are those campers?” you ask, because now you remember where you saw her use that thing; the battle against the Romans. It’s strangely nostalgic, although you realize it’s only been like three weeks since then.

“Yup,” she says, petting the dove’s head.

“Why does that one seem to like you?”

“Dunno, maybe it’s Austin.”

“Austin was on that ship?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you notice?”

“No, think I was too busy panicking. Speaking of which . . . Let’s get the fuck out of here!” Your crew starts, blinking at you before they all scramble back into their spots and begin to row with all they’ve got. Another gust of wind blows over your boat, stronger than the last one. The rest of your shirt is still lying on the boat floor, and when the wind rushes through, it lifts up a little, turning over your shirt once or twice. “Shit” You reach down to grab it, but it blows just past the tips of your fingers. Thankfully, Kyla grabs it before it can go over the side of the boat.

“You better put this back on,” she says, handing the shirt off to you, “you’re not hot enough to work as a distraction, so it’s just kind of weird.” You take the shirt from her, jaw dropping in indignation.
“You... What, I... I” You can’t quite seem to get your thoughts in order, because on the one hand, yes, of course you’re going to put your shirt back on, that’s just public decency. On the other hand, you can’t believe she would suggest something like that. Frankly, you are more than hot enough to serve as a distraction (at least you think so). But then again, you would definitely object to being used as a distraction, because you have some pride. But you could also totally do it. This turns out to be quite the conundrum for you.

“Well get it together.” Lou comes up behind you and slaps you across the back of your head.

“I’m totally hot enough to be a distraction, right?” It spills out of your mouth before you can stop it and for a second you’re worried that things are going to get kind of weird. However, Lou just sighs and rolls her eyes.

“I cannot believe I voted a walking human disaster like you captain. Focus you idiot.” She moves to flick you in the forehead, but you quickly pull on your shit to stop her from doing so.

“I am focused,” you say, because you are. You are so focused. You know exactly what is going on.

“You’ve got nowhere to run!” Directly in front of your ship, the right half of the pincer has finally gotten moving. Well. Shit. You recognize the kid standing on the prow of the ship, but it takes you a couple of minutes to place his name.

“I can’t believe that Sherman is going to try to stop us, you mutter before taking a deep breath and shouting. “Alter course, skirt alongside their ship, and try to keep the gap wide.”

“Sherman?” Lou asks, and next to her, Kyla snorts. You try your best to explain the phenomena that is Sherman.

“Most Ares kids come into the infirmary to get patched up like once a week, but this kid is something else. He comes into the infirmary with the weirdest injuries. Once he came in with a bruise the size of an apple on the side of his face and said he hit himself with a pair of clackers.” You scratch the back of your head, and despite the fact that Sherman could probably use you as a tooth pick, you’re not really intimidated. “He also ate a sprig of poison ivy because he thought it was rosemary.”

“Ah,” Lou says, “I see.” He’s got a sword and is waving it around over his head, shouting all kinds of challenges. “So what are we going to do?” You make a non-committal grunting noise, as your ship gets closer and closer. While Sherman is kind of an idiot you would really, really rather not have to run the risk of fighting him. Of course you can’t go too wide around the ship because on your left, Annabeth and a number of enemy ships are still lurking, and on your right there’s the shore. You look around at your crew. They’ve slowed down a decent bit, now that you’ve almost literally run into a problem. Then something occurs to you.

“I’ve got it. Keep to the left!” You walk back to where you had previously been sitting in the ship, and pull out your bow and trick arrows from underneath your bench.

“You’re going to shoot him?” Kyla asks, incredulously. “You couldn’t even land a solid shot on Nico when he was only twenty feet away and literally right in front of you.” A little something dark twists in your chest. You smile at her, before shoving the equipment into her hands.

“That’s why I’m not going to shoot him,” you say, “you are.” Kyla blinks, looks down at her hand and says:

“Oh. Yeah, okay.” She sets the sling down by her leg, and eyes the distance. Within a second of drawing the bow, a boxing-glove arrow is flying through the air, making direct contact with
Sherman’s face. He falls flat on his back, out like a light. The rest of Sherman’s crew blinks at their previous captain before looking back at your ship. Honestly, even you’re a little surprised. “You were hoping I was going to mess it up, weren’t you.”

“Yeah sort of,” you say, feeling a little twinge of jealousy, because why are you the only one who can’t fire while moving or at a moving target, come on.

“You think too much,” she says, sighing and slinging the bow over her shoulder. “It makes you a bad archer.”

“I know,” you say, because at this point, there’s not a lot you don’t know about what makes a good archer.

“But that’s also what makes you a good teacher and an even better doctor. Not all of us are good at everything.” You resist the urge to remind her that she’s basically the epitome of an Apollo kid and doesn’t have any room to talk. But you also realize that’s just bitterness and jealousy talking, and you’re done letting that kind of toxic shit leak out your mouth. Instead, you focus on the dazed ship. There must be something on your face because the kids in the other ships take one look at you and hit the deck.

“We surrender!” One shouts and the others murmur in agreement.

“Lou,” You say, “We’re boarding. The rest of you, don’t wait up,” You call over your shoulder to the rest of your crew, “This won’t take long.”

By the time you’re done rooting through all of their valuables and taking your pick, your own ship has almost sailed to far to jump back. But you’re also feeling considerably better, having talked for a bit with the kids on the ship. They took the attack and subsequent robbing fairly well. From what you could gather, it appeared that Sherman was the same sort of tyrant that Malcolm was, but that he was considerably larger, and thus more frightening. And since you and Lou don’t take anything besides the usual traps, they aren’t really all that upset. You decide that this was a win-win situation.

“Cutting it close,” Kyla says as you nearly miss the back edge of your boat while exiting the enemy’s ship.

“Well I made it, and that’s the important thing,” you reply. Kyla looks like she’s about to respond, when she’s cut off by a sharp whistle overhead. Birdy barely has time to point when something slams into the side of your ship. The shock buckles your knees, sending you tumbling backwards into the belly of the ship. Something soft spares your head from the unforgiving wood.

“Ow,” Lou says, pushing up onto her hands and knees, and rubbing the spot on her back. “Asshole.” Her voice is a hiss, filled with spite. You’re kind of shocked by how vehement that was before you realize her eyes aren’t focused on you, but on the kids in the other ship.

“My most sincere apologies,” Malcolm calls, standing proud on the prow of a new ship.

“When did he . . .” You note that Athena cabin’s number one is missing from his side. You can’t really make out most of the crew from where you’re at, but you’re fairly sure that if Annabeth was
on that ship, she’d be at the front. Different ship? But where would they get one? A pair of doves settle on the mast behind Malcolm, and it clicks for you and the girls at the same time.

“They used our own smoke screen against us,” Lou mutters, “Malcolm jumped over to the one I hit with the smoke screen, and made an arc behind us while we were distracted.” She looks over her shoulder, and sees that Annabeth’s ship is still coming. “They can put pressure on us without having to risk an attack until we’re cornered.”

“Smart,” Kyla says, though it sounds more like a curse then a complement.

“With Athena’s one and two, they’d have to be,” you mutter in reply, watching Malcolm carefully. Things are too close now, there’s no way you could slip away. You can’t push your crew to be that fast and you’re not clever enough to out think Malcolm. “Swing around!” you call, “If they want a fight, we’ll give them one.”

“Aye-aye Captain,” Lou says, and gives Kyla a sly look. “What kind of trick arrows do you have in there?” Kyla willingly hands over the quiver. You watch as Lou sorts through the arrows. Her eyes light up once she gets her hands on a sonic arrow. “Perfect.” She reaches into her bag, and pulls out a flat disk. It’s a little bigger than a fifty-cent piece, and looks like it’s made out of mother of pear. Working with quick nimble fingers, she uses a little bit of the spare rope to tie the disk to the arrow’s head. “Get it as close to the center of the ship as you can. It'll buy us enough time to swing around to the side.”

Kyla nods, draws the arrow and lets it fly. The high arc allows it to sail over Malcolm’s head as your own ship furiously tries to line up side by side. The sonic arrow sticks against baseboards at the foot of the mast. Just as your ships lines up, the arrow starts to wine.

“Hit the deck!” you say and your crew obeys unflinchingly. The other guys aren’t so lucky. When the sonic arrow goes off, a flash accompanies it. You can see the hard white light, even with your eyes screwed shut. As soon as it begins to fade, you jump to your feet. Swirling around the ship is a storm of what appears to be flower petals, morphing the air with broken stripes of color. You can’t help but wonder what the Stoll brothers had to trade to get their hands on this kind of trick.

A figure darts over the edge of the enemy ship, and lands in the middle of yours, before you can even begin a counter attack. He straightens, adjusting his shirt.

“Austin? No way,” you say, and before you, Austin bows. He takes a step forward, and you hold out your hand. “Wait . . . How do I know you’re on our side?”

“It does not becomes you to wonder too much at your own brother when he is here, nor doubt him,” Austin admonishes, and you roll your eyes.

“Are you sure you want to raid your own ship?” you ask with a smile, knowing he’s already got an answer.

“Better to raid with Hell, than to serve in Heaven.” Austin returns your smile, and you clap him on the shoulder.

“Not so fast!” Malcolm seems to have recovered surprisingly quickly, standing on the edge of his
ship. “If you think things will be that easy simply because-” His words are cut off by a boxing glove arrow to the face. You look over your shoulder and hold a fist out to Kyla.

“Nice.” After a quick fist bump, you turn back to the matter at hand. “Alright, now board the ship!” Your crew cheers, and begins to clamber over the side into enemy territory. The two ships are butted right up against each other, practically touching. It would only take a second to cross, and in this flurry it’d be near impossible to spot your enemy coming. Now is the perfect chance to take the enemy by surprise. It’s a shame that you’re not the only one thinking that though.

“Draw your sword, Solace.” Nico stands in front of you, having slunk over the side of the ship. Sunlight is twining its fingers through his hair and glowing like a halo. There’s a slight upturn at the corner of his mouth that undermines his serious tone. Around him kids clash, fighting for control of their ship, balancing on benches and ducking around the mast. Faint traces of flower petals still linger in the air, suspended, as if time had stopped for them. For a second you remember when you used to sketch as a kid, and wish you still did, so you could capture this look.

“Not a chance,” you say, “I’m not a betting man, but even I know my odds in a sword fight against you are terrible.” Nico quirks an eyebrow at you.

“So you’re just going to surrender?” His lips turn down in a tiny disappointed frown that you find so kissable right now. An idea begins to take shaky form in your head. You press your lips together to smother a smile.

“Of course not,” you say, and that tiny frown evaporates. It’s not quite a smile yet, but it’s a signal to continue. “Join us.” That word seems to startle him more than a sword strike, and he tries to take a stuttering step backwards, only to be met with the side of the boat. You press forward. “Join us.”

Nico takes another step back, up onto the lip of the boat. When he stands above you like that, the light breaks against his back, tracing a tight silhouette. You can feel your heart stutter and rather than lose your resolve, you find that you’re more determined than ever.

“What are you guys even doing?” Nico asks, though the point of his sword is slowly falling.

“We’re being pirates,” you say, and Nico looks at you like you’re crazy.

“Are you serious?” he asks. The smile you tried so desperately to suppress breaks though.

“Come on Nico,” you say holding out a hand, “you know you want to.” He looks at your hand, something flickering in his eye for a moment.

“Okay,” he says, sheathing his sword and taking your hand, “I’ll bite.”

“Welcome aboard,” you say, pulling him down from the edge and practically into your arms. The clashing of swords continues all around you, but you can’t quite bring yourself to care. You hold his hand, keeping that breath of space between the two of you before letting him go and taking a half step back. Maybe some other time, you’ll press him to be the first to step away; to make the choice to separate, but now’s not the time. You’d rather play it safe than sorry.

“Am I supposed to call you Captain now?” Nico asks, with a look that says he’s really not impressed.

“That, or Dread Pirate Roberts, whatever you prefer,” you say.

“Is that supposed to be a line from something?” Your heart nearly stops. No. It can’t be.
“Have you never seen *The Princess Bride*?” The world seems to hold its breath as Nico prepares his response, or maybe that’s just you.

“Never heard of it . . . Will . . . Will are you okay?” Those words keep ricocheting around your head. Never heard of it, never heard of it, never heard of it. Your jaw hangs open, and you simply cannot believe this. Absolutely not. No way. “Um . . .” He looks around for some sort of help, and Kyla quickly waltzed up to survey the damage.

“Hi, I’m Kyla. I don’t know if we’ve ever been properly introduced. What did you say to him?” she asks, all bright smiles.

“I said I’d never heard of *The Princess Bride*.” Kyla hums, nodding her head.

“Yes, that explains it. Will’s a bit of a nerd when it comes to corny romance things, but I guess you’ve probably picked up on that. Here, let me fix him.” Nico takes a step back, though eyes Kyla suspiciously. Kyla however, is completely nonplused; squaring your shoulders before slapping you into next week.

“Ow, oh my gods, *ow.*” You cup your hand against your stinging cheek. “That hurt worse than the spear, damn it Kyla.”

“No, worry about it,” she says, “Anyway, we’ve almost subdued the ship. What are your orders, Captain?” You take two more seconds to get over being slapped like that, and then decide that you had best shape up before she decides to do something like that again.

“First things first, grab Malcolm and toss him overboard.” Kyla looks to Lou and Lou nods. Mist gathers around her feet, snaking around the ship to where Malcolm is keeping a pair of your crew members in check with the edge of his sword. When those milky tentacles slither up his ankles he stops abruptly, turns, and runs straight for the other edge of his ship, jumping out into the water. Lou lets the Mist dissipate a second later. Her body slouches, and her breathing is a little faster, but there’s a smile on her face, and her shoulders shake with barely suppressed laughter. You let yourself laugh out loud as the realization of what just happen dawns on Malcolm’s face. He kicks and splashes in the water, but for all of his swearing he’s got nothing.

“Lou if you want to captain this ship, it’s yours for the taking,” you say, once you’re done enjoying Malcolm’s misery. Annabeth’s ship is approaching at your back, and you can’t afford to dawdle much longer. Bag of tricks clasp tightly in one hand, Lou carefully climbs into the other boat, and stands on one of the benches unoccupied by weary campers.

“I won’t force you to take my orders,” she announces, keeping her head held high. “If anyone thinks they are better suited, now is the time to step up.” A low whisper snakes around the ship, but no one stands, and no one raises their voice. “Everyone in favor of me becoming captain, say Aye.”

“Aye!” To Lou’s surprise her welcome is fairly warm. Despite their bruises, the campers look ready to keep on fighting.

“Kyla, be my first mate?” She looks over her shoulder, and offers a hand.

“Ooh, Miss Captain, I’m swooning.” Kyla smiles, but she takes Lou’s hand, and with grace like a doe, joins her on the bench.

“Orders, Grand Captain?” Lou smiles, a little in challenge, but mostly in fun.
“Keep up,” you say, turning to your own crew. “Man the oars, the navy’s on our tail, and I’ll be
damned if I let them sink us before the sun sets!” As tired as they are, your crew cheers, and sets
about trudging ahead. You look over your shoulder, smiling. “You think we can do it, Nico?” you
ask.

“No,” he says, “but we’re not going to make it easy for them either.”

It ends. All things do, but at least this ends with a bang. You don’t get much warning. Birdy lets out
a long shrill whistle, and Austin cries “Thar she blows!” You think that’s supposed to be a line from
Moby Dick, but you’re also pretty sure no one actually says that in the book. Of course, you’ve
never read Moby Dick, so you can’t really say for sure.

Yeah, they catch up to you, but just like Nico said, you sure don’t make it easy for them. “Someone
get Birdy down! The rest of you brace yourselves.” The big dude who put him on the mast in the
first place reaches up, and carefully sets your brother down on the deck, just in time for a wave to
rock your ship. Annabeth’s ship pulls up parallel to yours, but it’s much too far to jump.

“Surrender now and we will spare the ship,” Annabeth announces. Her voice carries with startling
clarity despite the distance. You take a few seconds to discuss the best way to reply to that statement
with your crew. Once a decision is reached, you step up to the side of the boat.

“Fuck off!” you call over the side. That momentary shock gives you just enough time to grab the
sack underneath the ship. You hand the confetti cannon to Nico and tie the two strings of firecrackers
together. “After I’ve lit these, fire.” He nods, and when he does fire, the swirl of confetti gives you
just enough cover to lob over the firecrackers.

“Sink them!” Annabeth’s voice is still clear and steady, if a little frustrated. Another wave rocks your
boat, tipping it nearly parallel before it rocks back down onto the lake. The sun cuts a jagged red line
across the sky, as your father’s chariot retires for the day. Another wave rocks the boat, and you
can’t help but think that the sunset is kind of fitting. Looks like you’re going down with a show too.

Just before you hit the water, there’s a chorus of bangs and screeches.

You smell like lake water, and your body is sore, but as you drag your sorry ass onto the lakeside
you can’t help but laugh. Nico follows you out of the water, coughing and hacking as he climbs up
next to you on hands and knees. Out across the water, three triremes are on fire, their orange glow
dancing across the inky lake water. Those slow burning hulks provide just enough light to see by.

“You alright there?” You lie back, propped up by your elbows. Nico glares at you before flopping
onto his back. “Weren’t you born in Venice, shouldn’t you be good at swimming?” He scoffs and
rolls his eyes.

“What, you think because there were canals everywhere, that I swam in them?” he says.

“... Wait, did you not swim in the canals in Venice?”

“Ew no. You’re not supposed to swim in the canals. The canals are disgusting. Do not swim in the
canals.” Nico’s face scrunches up, but it’s hard to take him all that seriously when he looks like a drowned rat. His usually fluffy black bangs are plastered to his forehead, and his clothing is suctioned to his skin, like a black morph suit. You note pleasantly that he’s filled out since things have quieted down at camp. Where his ribs used to push hard against his skin, there are now only low bumps. Along his arms there are a few strips of toned muscle where before there was only the meeting of bone and skin. He’s still got a little ways to go, but he’s better than we was. He’s better.

“Will?” Your eyes snap up to his lips first then his eyes.

“Sorry, I was just thinking.” About what, exactly, you don’t remember.

“You really find canals that thought provoking?” Nico’s got that look in his eye like he’s not impressed. You’ve pretty much got it memorized now, the little smirk at the corner of his mouth, and the slight rise of his eyebrows.

“Well I was just thinking, that the whole canal thing is a shame.” Clouds blot out the moonlight, but you think the warm orange glow of the fire suits Nico just as well. You can still see the way his chest sinks with a long low breath out, the slow roll of his shoulders, and the way his eyelashes brush against the apple of his cheeks when his eyes go half lidded, not tired exactly, more relaxed.

“Someone should tell that to whoever named Venice Beach.”

Nico’s eyes snap open at that, shoulders hopping in a laugh that’s more a burst of air than it is an actual sound. His legs flex as he toes off his sopping wet shoes, and then bend back, so he can peel of his socks without having to sit up.

“Venice has beaches too you know, just a little ways outside the city. They’re crazy packed, but they’re beautiful too. Fine white sand, not like this stuff.” He runs his fingers through the coarse brown and yellow lakeside grains.

The sun is gone, but it’s still hot as hell, and the wet cotton sticking to your chest is neither comfortable, nor is it really helping to cool you down. Your shirt was ruined when you used it as an impromptu bandage, so you decide that it’d be better gone. Once you’ve managed to strip it off, you focus on removing your shoes. “Weren’t you really little when you lived in Italy? How do you remember what the beaches were like?” Stupid laces. This is why you only wear sandals when you can help it. Why do sneakers even exist? Who the Hades likes these dumb foot prisons? When your feet are finally free and you can settle back again, you notice that Nico’s gone quiet.

“Hey, Neeks, you alright?” you ask looking over. He’s propped himself up on his hands, and you only get a glimpse of his wide eyes and slightly parted lips, before he comes back to himself, shaking his head.

“Um, uh, yeah . . . Yeah. You’re fine.” Even the cicadas stop, waiting for Nico to realize what he’s said. He catches your eye. The both of you stare in muted embarrassment as matching blushes run like wildfire across your faces. Nico is the first to break your staring contest, looking anywhere but you. “I-I mean, me. I meant me. I’m fine. Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine.” You’re still not entirely sure that he was thinking what you thought he was thinking . . . Okay that’s not true. You don’t want to get ahead of yourself, but there is definitely a corner of your brain that is saying: I knew I was hot enough to be a distraction. “Anyway, yeah I was little, but I still remember it. We went to the beach a lot.”

“Were the waves any good?” you ask. It’s not really what you want to ask. What you want to ask is who ‘we’ is (does it have something to do with the name Bianca? You still remember him, whispering that name in his sleep the night he almost disappeared on you) and if he misses those days in Venice, before he knew he was a demigod.
“Waves? Like for surfing? Do you surf?” All previous embarrassments forgotten, Nico’s eyes light up. You’re a little taken aback by his sudden enthusiasm.

“I was born and raised in L.A., over near Beverly Hills.” Nico pouts, and gods that is so freaking cute.

“That’s not an answer,” he says.

“Yes. I can surf, and I’m pretty damn good, if I do say so myself.” Nico shakes his head, leaning back on his arms.

“You know the first time I saw surfing, it was in that dumb movie about the surfing penguins,” he says.

“Wait, are you serious?” You can’t help the breathy little laugh that slips out.

“Yeah. We watched it in one of my classes when my teacher was absent. It’s hard to get a substitute for a military school in the middle of nowhere, so they just put us in front of a TV. Anyway, I thought surfing was made up for the longest time.” Nico smiles just a little, his mouth turned up at the corner. “Like the game in the uh . . . the Harry Potter movies.”

“Oh my gods.” You can’t help but laugh full and loud, falling back against the rough sand. “Neeks, if there are ever big enough waves around here, I’ll teach you how to surf.” There’s a rustling beside you, but you can’t quite bring yourself to turn you head and look over, until he calls your name.

“Will, are you serious?” he asks. You turn you head to the side, and take in Nico’s face. He looks so vulnerable now, open, but guarded, like he wants to hope, but knows better than that. You smile at him, and wonder how long it’s been since someone promised to do something normal like that in the future.

“Yeah. I promise, Spooks.” Nico looks down at his lap, where his hands slowly intertwine with each other. Then suddenly, he stands. His hands brush at the back of his pants in a futile attempt to separate the clinging sand from his damp jeans.

“I’m going to hold you to that promise, Sunshine.” He holds out his hand to help you up.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” You take it, and for those fleeting seconds that your fingers connect, you swear you can feel a spark of something where before there was only an empty cavern. It’s gone as soon as you think it might be there, but you would know a spark of life in death.

Better, you think as the two of your walk back to your respective cabins, only a hand’s width apart. He’s getting better.

Friday comes, and Capture the Flag is a blast. The teams are crazy mixed up this time, but somehow Nico is still on the opposite team. You wonder if it’s intentional. Maybe he likes to kick your ass every Friday. Ah well, this time you don’t really see him that much. Instead, Jason is the one handing you your ass.

“I thought Apollo kids were supposed to be good at this sort of thing,” he says, with his pleasant, all American boy smile, and a hand held out to help you up. You know there is absolutely no way for him to know what a sore spot your astounding lack of combat skills is. It’s probably just supposed to
be a light jab, the kind that he exchanges all the time with Percy. Maybe this is even a misplaced attempt at being your friend. That doesn’t stop you from deciding you’d rather get up on your own.

“And I thought that children of Zeus weren’t supposed to exist, but there you are.” He grimaces, and awkwardly tucks the hand you refused to accept into his pocket.

“Uh . . . yeah.” Well, that was a thoroughly unpleasant social experience, and you are now going to go home and pretend it never happened. “Sorry, if I hit a sore spot.” You fight the urge to sigh, turning to look at him over your shoulder. *Oh my gods, he looks like a kicked puppy.*

“Don’t worry about it.” Wow. Look at that ground. That ground is so interesting. Wow.

“It’s just that Nico talks a lot about you, so I figured I should at least say 'Hi' or something.” As awkward as this is, that first bit catches your attention.

“Nico talks about me?” As soon as you speak Jason gets a look on his face that just screams *oh shit.* You try not to smile too wide, that might make you look a little crazy.

“Yeah, I mean, for Nico it’s a lot.” He shrugs, and runs a hand over the little groove in the side of his hair. “Don’t tell Nico I told you that because he will without a doubt send me straight down to Hades.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that. Percy came back twice, so your odds of getting out are probably pretty good,” you say with a shrug. “And if all else fails, I hear that Persephone’s garden is gorgeous.” Jason smiles at that.

“Yeah, but apparently Hades is trying to bond with Nico by learning to play Mythomagic. He’d probably force me to play him.”

“What is Mythomagic?” you ask, and Jason raises an eyebrow.

“It’s like Nico’s favorite thing . . . or, well it used to be.” He frowns a bit, and runs a finger over the groove in the side of his hair again. You’re beginning to think that that’s a nervous habit. “He lets little bits of info slip in conversations sometimes and he gets pretty excited about it, once he gets going. It’s a card game.” You nod, filing that information away for later.

“Cool . . . Well, I’m going to head back. I have to make sure all my siblings get back in one piece.” You hook a thumb over your shoulder.

“Good luck man.” He waves you goodbye, but just as you’re about to turn back around, a thought occurs to you.

“Hey uh, this might sound weird, but you should ask to play it with Nico sometime.” Jason nods, but he continues to stay quiet. You can tell he’s waiting for you to continue. “It’s just that . . . Nico’s got a lot of darkness knotted up inside of him. Like a lot. Nico’s halfway to a ghost. Honestly, if he wasn’t a child of Hades, I don’t think he’d have made it this far.” Jason’s impassive stare gets a little harder, so you take a few seconds to breath. “There is absolutely nothing I can do about it in a strict medical sense. It’s something that Nico has to learn to deal with, but having people who support him is going to be important. So just . . . Doing normal things, I think, is going to be really important. Anyway if he really likes card games, that’d be a good start,” you finish kind of lamely. That stare of his reminds you that he used to be a Roman Praetor alongside Reyna. He’s not as scary, but you can see how he managed to stand beside her.

“Oh, he says after a moment, nodding slowly, “thanks for the advice.”
“Don’t mention it.” *No really, don’t.* This interaction was awkward and uncomfortable, and you would like to never have to remember it. You’re about to turn and go, but Jason calls out to you.

“Mind if I ask you a question?” You nod, because saying no would be rude, and you’re bossy, controlling, and a little stuck up, but you’re sure as Hades not rude.

“Shoot.”

“What are your intentions towards Nico?” *Shit.* You really need to learn to be less obnoxiously obvious with your infatuation. Still, the way he phrased that sounded an awful lot like a challenge.

“As a doctor, I want him to get better. As a teenager, I’d like to kiss him breathless. But I’ve been a doctor longer than I’ve been a teenager, and I’ll be a doctor long after I’m done being a teenager,” you say. He looks a little taken aback, and you kind of regret saying all of that.

“So, what does that mean, exactly?” he asks.

“I really like him, and if he ever decides he really likes me, then I’d love to go out with him. But I also have a duty as doctor, and in the event those two interests conflict, being a doctor will always come first.” You shrug, and once again Jason nods.

“Alright,” he says, and then he smiles. “You’re a good kid. I’m glad that Nico has someone like you looking out for him.” You can’t help but smile too.

“Ditto, wonder boy.”

... 

A week passes. Nico kicks your ass at Capture the Flag *again.* At this point you think it’s getting ridiculous.

... 

Most days, you live with knowledge that fate is not kind to demigods swung over your shoulders like a cape. It’s heavy, but you’ve come to live with it, and be proud that despite the general conspiracy against your friends and family, everyone keeps moving forward.

Today, however, you think that fate can be a brilliant thing. It starts with a joke, a lost sword match, and a thermometer that’s reaching for the stars. It ends with Percy in the bay, pushing and pulling the water into waves that make you ache for California beaches. Soon enough, the rest of the campers give up trying to be productive in this heat, and join you and your cabin down at the beach. You put in a few words with Athena cabin and Hephaestus cabin, and in less than an hour, you’ve got a pair of surfboards.

“Hey Nico!” you call, nearly tripping over yourself as you scramble up the dune. Once you come to a stop, Nico just looks at you like you’re crazy. “Still want to learn how to surf?”

“Do you have a surf board?” he asks, and you nod.

“There’s another kid from L.A. in Athena cabin. She whipped up a blueprint for the board, and
Hephaestus cabin made a machine that could spin one out. They’re not the greatest, but they’ll do.”
A tiny smile perks up at the corner of his mouth.

“Okay,” he says, “let’s do it.”

…

Nico is terrible at surfing, even worse than he is at archery. You didn’t even think it was possible for someone to wipe out like that. You can’t remember the last time you laughed so hard.

“Don’t laugh asshole.” Nico comes out of the water sputtering, and coughing. You paddle over, helping him up onto his board again.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He just scowls at you. “Hey, on the bright side at least you stood up this time.”

“Ugh,” he replies flopping back on his board. Nico is quiet for a few seconds before he sighs. “The penguins made this seem a lot easier.” You laugh so hard you fall right off your board and end up gargling seawater.

…

Again, and again, and again, every game of Capture the Flag Nico beats you. And every game, victory is always just beyond the tips of your fingers. Next time. You resolve, looking down at your hands and the ribbons of light leaking from your fingers. It’s gotten easier, but that’s only made Nico step up his game. Well, you guess that a shadow looks darker next to a light. Next time I’ll get him. I’ll win.

…

He splits off from the little clump he’s in. You barely catch him slip away in the corner of your eye, but you won’t be fooled. This is the last game of Capture the Flag this summer, and you’ll be damned if you lose again. You follow him, pivoting and immediately launching after him. You may not be the best fighter, but you are pretty damn fast.

He’s close now. Your fingertips are centimeters from grazing his back when you reach out your hand. Just a little closer. Your fingertips itch, and you let yourself open up, releasing ribbons of bright light. They reach out, tangling around his shoulders. The effect is instantaneous. Nico is pulled to a stop, but you’re still moving too fast. Your momentum has you slamming right into his back, toppling the both of you to the ground. However Nico’s not that easy to stop (you’d be a little disappointed if it was that easy). He immediately tries to roll the two of you over so he can escape, but you keep rolling, struggling to win out, until finally you’ve got Nico pinned underneath you. He goes for his sword, with one arm, but you catch him by the wrist.

“I don’t think so.” You pin both his wrists above his head, just to be safe. Then you smile wide and
bright, if a little wolfishly. “I win!”

“Think again,” Nico says, and as soon as he does you hear a commotion off your shoulder. You look up, only to see the opposing team streak across the creek. That bright blue flag flutters in the wind, before turning into a brilliant crimson. You could cry. Instead you let out a string of inarticulate curses, groan, and hang your head.

“Uh, Will?” Nico says.

“Yea-oh.” Oh. You are currently in a very suggestive position and wow, you really need to get up right now. After you scramble to your feet, there’s an awkward couple of seconds in which you try desperately to think of anything but your earlier position. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. We still won.” There’s a mischievous gleam in his eye and you sock him in the shoulder.

“Asshole.” Nico just shrugs his shoulder, like that doesn’t even faze him. “Damn, I can’t believe I lost again. Apollo cabin has never had a losing streak this bad.”

“Never?” Nico asks.

“Never. We almost always win if it’s our flag we’re defending, and if it’s not, we usually manage to pick the winning team.” You sigh, ambling back in the direction of your cabin, and motioning for Nico to come along. He does and the two of you walk quietly for a few minutes before you speak again. “Thanks to you, Apollo cabin is now the unluckiest team in camp.”

“It’s not really luck if you can’t keep up, is it? That’s more just a difference in skill.” You gasp, slapping a hand over your chest in the most melodramatic show of offense you can muster.

“Excuse me? Wow, I didn’t know you could be so cruel, Spooks.” He rolls his eyes, and shoves you lightly.

“Shut up, Sunshine.” You smile, shoving him back just a little bit. He looks back at you then, an eyebrow raised in challenge, but you hold your hands up. This is one battle you know you’d lose. Nico just rolls his eyes again, and keeps walking. You take a couple of quick steps to catch up. As you emerge from the forest, you can spot other clumps of campers making their way out of the forest.

“Are you staying here after summer?” Nico asks suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence.

“No,” you say looking over at him, and for a second Nico almost looks disappointed. “I’m heading back to California for the school year, but I always come visit during Thanksgiving and Winter break, and then again during Spring break. What about you?”

“I still haven’t decided yet.” He kicks at a rock in his path with a little more force than is entirely necessary. “Reyna has been sending me Iris Messages every once and a while. She says that New Rome has great schools, but I don’t really know if I’m ready to go back to a school you know. It’s been a few years.” You hum, nodding.

“Where is New Rome anyway? I know it’s on the West Coast somewhere.” You wonder if it’s close enough for you to visit. According to the rumor mill, the door to Hades is somewhere in L.A. It’d be kind of crazy to think that all your life there was a demigod camp right next door and you never knew.

“It’s in the Berkeley hills,” he says and you nearly trip over yourself.

“Really?” you ask, and he nods.
“Is that near you?” You wish. As much as the Romans sometimes annoyed you, you’re curious about them and their facilities.

“No, it’s about five hours north of where I live. But it’s just across the bridge from my extended family. They all live in San Francisco. When I was little we visited the Berkley hills sometimes.” You try to remember if you ever saw something suspicious back then, but nothing comes to mind.

“Do you visit your family a lot?” You can’t help but laugh at that.

“No, no way. They’re uh . . . well let’s just say that they’re not the most open minded people. I haven’t seen them since I was twelve.” You shiver, remembering the last time you saw your grandparents, before shoving that memory deep, deep inside your brain. “So uh, quick conversation change . . . The fireworks show is coming up. Were you planning on going?” Nico shrugs.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen the fireworks show before, I’ve always left camp before the last day.” You’re close enough now that you can see the glow of your cabin, and even hear the faint sound of Kanye West’s new album pounding through the walls. It occurs to you that there are a lot of words on that album that your younger siblings should not be learning. You really hope that none of them are back yet, but somehow you doubt that.

“Well, you know I always watch the fireworks with Lou and Cecil. If you wanted someone to watch the fireworks with you’re welcome to join us.” You shove your hands in your pocket as you walk and look up at the sky. It’s not a date, and you know it doesn’t even sound like a date, but it kind of feels like you’re asking him on a date, and that makes you nervous enough that you can’t quite look at him.

“Sure.” Your heart starts beating out of time, and you look over at him, to find that Nico is studying the ground. “I mean, I’ve never seen the fireworks so I might as well.”

“Cool, I’ll meet you at the beach after dinner.”

“Yeah, see you then.”

“See you.” Nico hesitates for a second, before turning away and heading towards his cabin. You wait until Nico slips inside his cabin before you pump your fist in the air.

“Yes!” It’s not a date, and you realize it’s not a date but you are so excited.

“Did you do it?” You whirl around to see half your siblings sticking their heads out the front door, and the other half leaning out the window. Kyla is practically bouncing on her toes, looking at you expectantly.

“Ask him out?” She doesn’t even have the presence of mind to look exasperated.

“How long were you listening?” you ask shrilly, making your way over to your cabin as quickly as possible in order to avoid making a bigger scene then this has already become.

“We caught the ‘I’ll meet you at the beach’ part onward,” Victoria supplies, crawling out the window a little further. “Birdy has good ears he relayed the conversation for us.” You hope she falls on her face. However Jamie-Lynn and Devereux are holding onto one leg each, so she probably won’t fall any time soon.

“Birdy you absolute traitor.” The little brother in question peaks around Kyla’s legs and smiles, not a
trace of guilt to be seen.

“So?” Jamie-Lynn demands.

“So what?” you ask, folding your arms over your chest.

“Stop stalling.” Devereux rolls his eye.

“. . . It’s not a date, but I asked him to go watch the fireworks with me, Lou and Cecil, and he said yes, so yeah. We’re going to watch the fireworks together . . . but not together together.” You rub the back of your head shyly. Kyla squeals, and charges out onto the green, followed closely by the entire rest of your family. They tackle hug you, and when that knocks you to the ground, they proceed to pile on top, until you are pretty sure you’re going to be crushed to death.

Still, as they all scramble to their feet and usher you into the cabin, all the while grilling you on every moment leading up to the not date,

(“You did what?”)

(“Calm down Kyla. It sounds more suggestive than it was.”)

(“Will, what does suggestive mean?”)

(“It means a thing is suggesting something.”)

(“I don't get it, what was you playing with Nico suggesting?”)

(“. . . Nissa, I'll explain it to you when you're older”)

You can’t help but smile.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was alternately going to be titled: I don't know how to pace things, but this summer's got to end. But then I remember I don't title theses chapters so I didn't.

Austin's words were brought to you by:
II. A Game of Chess- (The Wasteland): T.S. Eliot
I. The Burial of the Dead- (The Wasteland): T.S. Eliot
Hyperion: A Fragment- Keats
Odysseys- Homer (Translated by Richard Lattimore)
Paradise Lost- Milton

- Here Austin says “Better to raid with Hell than to serve in Heaven.” Which is a play on the original phrase “Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.” Austin is making a really dumb pirate joke, because he is a dumb nerd.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will and Nico have the pseudo-date of the century, and the sky doesn't fall, but they do talk about some pretty heavy stuff.

Chapter Notes

A little birdy told me that it was Solangelo week last week. (And by a little birdy, I mean my entire dash, and also my sister. Repeatedly. Loudly.) I figured a new chapter would be a good contribution. I also added a bonus chapter after this one. It's not really plot relevant (what this story has a plot??), but I wanted to sort of work through what my headcannons for Will’s family are, and how he gets along with his mom.

It’s been so long since I’ve updated this fic, that I forgot what I notation I use in between time skips. Also, I would like to put a disclaimer up here. I apologize if anyone is unduly offended by the twin joke.

Austin’s line was brought to you buy:
Richard Wilbur "Lying"

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It is six twenty-one and your heart is beating out of your chest.

Oh gods oh gods oh gods oh gods

“Hey Will? Dinner’s starting in ten minutes.” The sound of Kyla’s voice makes you jump a mile high, and loose enough light to erase the empty shadows of your cabin. You turn and watch her blink away the stars. Your stomach drops out. Great, you’re losing it. You’re going insane. This is awful and you have never had any good ideas ever. “You know what, why don’t I get everyone together? You just wait here.”

You nod.

This is fine. Everything is fine.

...

It’s six fifty-six and the barbeque on your plate looks absolutely delicious, borderline pornographic. Seriously, you don’t think you’ve seen better ribs when it comes to camp food. Not to mention the fact that you love ribs. Ribs are great. They are the gifts of the gods.
It’s too bad you’ve never been less hungry in your entire life.

. . .

It’s seven twenty-two and the sun still hasn’t set yet, holy shit. Seriously. What is the sun’s freaking problem? You love your dad, but seriously? At this rate the fireworks won’t start until nine. That means you have to wait an hour and a half. That is so long. You will die of old age before the fireworks start and then you’ll never get to go on a da- . . .

It’s not a date. Totally not a date.

. . .

It’s seven twenty-eight, and you’re pretty sure it’s not a date. Right? He doesn’t think it’s a date right? Not that you would mind that. Frankly you would love to go on a date with Nico. You would sell one of the twins to the devil for a date with Nico. After all there’s two of them. It’s not like you really need the spare anyway.

. . .

It’s seven thirty, exactly. Seven thirty even. Seven . . . thirty. Seven thirty. You stare at the clock by your bedside and keep repeating the time to yourself in your head, but with every syllable that ricochets around your empty skull, the second hand seems to slow. Soon, it’s like it’s not moving at all, and you’re probably losing your mind.

A nervous buzzing lies just underneath your skin and after the minute hand on the clock finally strikes seven thirty-one you realize it’s time you calmed the fuck down.

First things first: acknowledge why you are freaking out. Okay that’s easy. You really want to go watch the firework with Nico, but not yet. Well, sort of. It’s like one half of your brain is drunk on the excitement of doing something almost romantic with Nico and the other half is consumed with all the many ways in which this could go horribly, horribly wrong. You want it to happen, but feel unprepared. So you’re kind of torn.

Okay step two: meet in the middle. Think this through rationally. It’s very likely that this not-date-thing will be neither as great as the happy part thinks it will be, nor as much of a towering disaster as the freaking out part thinks it will be. There. Logic. Reasoning. You should feel better now. . .

There’s still a nervous buzzing going on in your brain, so you move on to step three: burn that bridge when you get to it.
At seven thirty-five you give up. There is no use worrying about hanging out with Nico so much. After all, you’re just friends. You invited him to hang out with you, Lou and Cecil. There’s no way this could be a date, and while that’s a little disappointing it’s also strangely relieving.

You wander outside to the front steps of your cabin, where your entire family is gathered. It’s the closest thing they’d ever come to giving you space, but you can’t say you don’t appreciate it.

“Hey,” you call, even though you know they heard you step outside. Victoria’s got her snare sticks, and an old book to tap out a rhythm on. The twins have their fiddles, and Kyla’s got . . . Wait a minute, that’s your guitar. When did she get it? Ah well, you let it go. “Are you guys having a jam session?” you ask. Birdy raises a tambourine and shakes it in answer.

“We know what boredom is,” Austin smiles and beckons you over to sit with him, “a fierce velleity.”

“And we know how to beat it!” Kyla says brightly. “You are just in time. Here, take the guitar. Do that cool thing.” She passes it over to you and you try not to sigh.

Honestly, you know four chords on the guitar, but when you were thirteen you watch this movie called *August Rush*, and afterwards you learned to play the guitar like the kid played it in the movie.

As soon as you start up with something simple, the twins pick up their violins. Victoria taps out a rhythm simple enough that the rest of you can keep time to it, and all the rest do their best to contribute too. Chloe leads the little ones in easy rhythms to mimic, and Kyla and Austin harmonize as they sing. Your music shifts through blues and jazz, to something poppy and upbeat, until someone gets off beat, and then the whole thing unravels. You just smile, and shake your head. The nervous buzzing beneath your skin has dissipated, and you can hardly imagine why you felt so nervous before.

“Will, aren’t you going to be late?” Kyla asks, looking at her watch. “It’s eight fifteen.”

“Shit!” You bolt to your feet, and start out towards the lakeshore, leaving a chorus of ‘good luck’ in your wake.

. . .

Lou, Cecil and Nico are already waiting by the lakeshore for you. Cecil looks practically giddy with relief, but Lou and Nico are too deeply engaged in conversation to notice that you’re even there.

“I figured you would have been here early,” Cecil says, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

“Shut up. Did you even know I invited Nico until he showed up?” You sock him in the shoulder and Cecil rolls his eyes.

“I heard some kids in Aphrodite talking about it. You know, there’s a lot of heartbreak now that you’re pretty much off the market,” he says. You consider this fact for a moment. Well, you do like to think of yourself as pretty popular, but you seriously doubt anyone’s going to be all that heartbroken about it.

“Since when do you hang out with Aphrodite cabin?” you ask.
“Well we weren’t really hanging out . . . They didn’t exactly know I was there,” he says.

“You almost don’t want to ask, but as a responsible citizen (and the one who has to fix all of his shit after he messes it up) you really ought to know.

“I wasn’t doing anything weird. I was just stealin’ stuff, and then I heard the door opening so I hid underneath someone’s bed.” It should worry you that he doesn’t consider robbing Aphrodite cabin, hiding under their beds and listening to their gossip, weird, but honestly you’re barely even surprised.

“You hid under someone’s bed?” you ask.

“I figured they’d be more likely to open the closet.” He nods very seriously. Well you can’t argue with that.

“Oh, Will!” Lou blinks at you, like she hadn’t even noticed you were standing there. Nico starts a bit, and turns around. There’s a light blush on his cheeks and you’re not sure if it was because of whatever he was talking to Lou about, or because you surprised him, or what, but it makes your stomach tie itself in some really pleasant knots. “How long have you been here?”

“Just long enough to become an accessory after the fact,” You say with a sigh, and Cecil gives Lou a thumbs-up. Lou nods very carefully. You’re not entirely sure what that exchange means and you’re not going to ask. Absolutely no good has ever come from those two collaborating ever.

“Well, we’d better go stake out a spot,” you say. Your best friends nod very enthusiastically, and go skittering off. “Sometimes I wonder why I put up with them.” You follow after them at a leisurely pace. Something tells you they already have a spot all picked out.

“They’re a lot,” Nico offers, “but not . . . bad.”

“Please don’t ever tell them that,” you say, “The last thing they need is for another person to validate their actions.”

Lou is waving her arms at you across the beach, while Cecil fiddles with something in his hands. You hope it’s not a stolen something, but as they say, ignorance is bliss.

“Hey, this reminds me,” you say, before the two of you are within earshot of the two of them, “what were you talking to Lou about? She seemed really into it.”

“Oh uh . . . we were just talking about a game,” he says vaguely, “Lou Ellen brought it up.” You hum acknowledgement of the statement. Lou can talk for hours if you let her, and you suppose that Nico made the mistake of letting her.

When you finally settle down on the picnic blanket that Lou and Cecil had apparently set out ahead of time, Cecil quickly shoves whatever was in his hands, into his pocket. You study him for a few moments, before you notice something strange.

“Cecil, are you wearing earplugs?” It would make sense for someone who had sensitive hearing to wear earplugs, but he’s never worn them before. Cecil points at his ears.

“I can’t hear you dude, I’m wearing earplugs,” he says. You pinch the bridge of your nose.

“There he is!” You start and turn to look down the beach. Piper, Lacy, and Drew are zeroed in on Cecil. You turn and gesture for him to look at the girls. Cecil smiles, and mumbles something like ‘right on time,’ before bolting. “Cecil, stay put!” Piper’s voice has the gold tinge to it, that makes you
suspect that she’s charm speaking. However, Cecil’s earplugs prevent her honeyed words from messing with his mind. He just runs, and seeing as how he probably has something of theirs, they run after him.

“What was that about?” you ask.

“Well, he stole something from Aphrodite cabin, didn’t he?” Lou says, casually.

“How do you know about that, you weren’t even paying attention when we were talking about that,” you say, and Lou looks a little too startled by something that was just a nitpicking comment.

“Lulu!” Kyla appears out of fucking nowhere, and just scoops Lou up in her arms. Lou shrieks a delighted laugh, then poorly pretends she is annoyed by her girlfriend’s sudden appearance.

“Kyla, what are you doing?” Something about the way she says that sounds entirely too scripted to be real.

“We haven’t been on a date in weeks, so I’m stealing you.” Kyla is a much more convincing performer, and you would have bought the whole thing, except that Kyla continues, “Have fun Will!” You know exactly what that means, and suddenly you are absolutely astounded. Kyla and Lou run off before you have the chance to call them out on their shit.

“Those rats,” you say, and it’s meant to apply to your friends as a whole. Nico looks a little shocked.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, but you just shake your head. Your friends are ridiculous. You can’t believe that Cecil would risk the wrath of the Aphrodite cabin just so he could set you up on a pseudo date. Although if he explained it to Aphrodite cabin, and gave them their thing back, they would probably let it slide.

“Don’t worry about it,” you say. Nico tilts his head to the side, considering you for a second before nodding.

“Well, what do you want to do until the fireworks start?” he asks. You think for a moment, trying think of something that would be entertaining, but doesn’t require getting up, or putting a lot of thought into something.

“We can play question and answer. You ask me something, I ask you something,” you say. It has the potential to go horribly wrong, but on the flip side you could learn a lot about Nico.

“Alright,” he says, though he seems more than a little skeptical.

“Do you want to go first, or should I?” you ask.

“I’ll go first,” Nico says, watching you warily, “what’s most afraid you’ve ever been?”

“Alright, this one’s easy,” you say, “so when I was like, six, I went camping with my mom in Sequoia National Park. Like the idiot child I was, I went wondering off. I didn’t even know I was a demigod yet, or what to do, so I just ran back towards my camp. Of course the hellhound was faster, and it would have killed me, if it hadn’t been for my mom. My mom is a costume designer for plays and movies and stuff; she does big time things. Well, when I was younger she’d always carry knives and swords and stuff under the guise that they were props. Turns out, it was in case something came after me. She had a celestial bronze rapier, and it went right through the wolf’s heart. I had never been so scared in my entire life.”

“Really?” Nico asks, “that was the scariest thing you’ve ever seen?”
“Oh no, not by a long shot. Your question was ‘what’s the most afraid I’ve ever been’. I’ve seen a lot of scary stuff, but at least I was a little prepared for it. When I was just a little kid, I never thought I could die and I’d never seen a real monster before. I still don’t really like dogs because of that.” You shiver, remembering the time you walked into the coliseum and saw a hellhound the size of a bus. Stupid sword instructor. Seriously, what was that guy’s problem? He was at camp for maybe three weeks, and he never once had a good idea. “Alright, now it’s my turn. Have you ever met Hades? I mean, I know he showed up at the Battle of Manhattan, but have you ever really talked to him like ‘hey dad.’”

“Yes,” Nico says like it’s no big deal, “I lived with him for a while. Or well . . . I lived in the Underworld. I tried not to stay at the palace. Persephone doesn’t like me for obvious reasons.”

“Seriously?” Wow, that’s . . . That was a lot more than you were expecting.

“Yeah. While I was over in Greece, he actually built me a room so that when I die I can be elevated to a special place in the House of Death.” Nico shrugs, meanwhile your mind is quite literally blown. “What about you?”

“Have I ever met Hades?” You snort a laugh, “No.”

“No, I meant, have you ever met your dad, Apollo,” Nico ventures.

“Oh . . .” You scratch the back of your head awkwardly. Of all the questions he had to ask . . . “No. I’m one of the few kids in my cabin who hasn’t.” You shrug, as if it’s no big deal.

“Really?” Nico asks. He tilts his head to the side and examines you, like something about that story just doesn’t fit.

“Well, he crashed a bus into the lake, so a lot of my siblings saw him then. I wasn’t at camp so I missed seeing him. But he’s visited some of my other siblings, like Kyla. When she was little, she got lost in a park, and she didn’t know what to do so she just sat down and started singing. A man came up to her and told her she had a lovely voice. She greeted him as her father, and apparently Apollo was so proud that she recognized him that he sat down and sang with her until her mom and her stepdad arrived. When he asked her how she knew it was him, she said ‘you have a lovely voice too.’ Apollo was so thrilled that he gave her Orpheus’ lyre, and promised it would one day save lives.” You shake your head. “Then there’s Austin. Apparently Dad, visited him once in a dream. He won’t tell me what they talked about though. Apparently it’s important that I, specifically, don’t know.” You’re a little more bitter than perhaps you need to be, but hearing about your father always sets you on edge. “The twins were never supposed to come to camp, but Dad went to Maine to convince their mother that we needed them. They arrived at camp the winter break before the Battle of Manhattan. Turns out they were prodigies, the best archers in Apollo cabin next to Chloe.”

“What about when Rachel became the Oracle,” Nico asks, and that question really stings.

“According to Chiron, my dad specifically requested that I not be present when it happened.” You sigh, lying back on the ground and looking up at the stars. The first firework flies up into the sky and rains down sparks. That should be the end of your game, but Nico continues talking.

“I’m sorry,” he says and you shake your head.

“There’s no way you could have known that my dad has been dodging me.” You shrug. “Besides, most kids at camp have never met their godly parent. Lou spent five years at camp before her mother even bothered to claim her. Chiron says that a lot of the new medical books he gets are indirect gifts from dad. Hey, you’ve met him though right?” you ask, and Nico nods.
“This is going to be a weird question but . . . Do I look like him? It’s just that . . . Kyla and Austin both say I look more like him than any of our siblings, and I don’t look anything like my mom.” You shift a little nervously, and your nerves only get worse when Nico takes a while to answer.

“Yes,” he says finally, and you look over to notice that there’s a blush on his cheeks, “You do look a lot like him. But, why do you care? I mean it seems like he ignores you.”

“I’m a little bitter about it, sure, but I’m not all that mad. There’s probably some weird reason he doesn’t want to see me,” you say with a shrug.

“You have a lot of faith in the gods,” Nico says carefully. You smile at him. Nico probably knows better than anyone how petty and childish the gods can be.

“Maybe,” you say, “but it’s not so hard to believe. If the gods could ever be half as good as their kids, then I know I can trust them.”

“That’s optimistic,” Nico says, relaxing back as the fireworks crash above you. “It figures that the son of the sun god would look at the bright side.” He looks beautiful; smiling just a little while a thousand different colored lights paint his skin. You wonder vaguely if it’s cheesy or a cliché, to be so enraptured by a person over the smallest things, but it’s just an idle thought. A part of you has accepted that at this point, you love being in love with him. And besides, at the very least, this kids deserves to have someone faun over him, even if it’s just your thoughts in your head.

“Says the son of death,” you retort. Nico snorts a laugh as the fireworks rush on towards their grand finale.

“I’m a realist, not a pessimist,” he insists, and now it’s your turn to laugh.

“Keep telling yourself that, Spooks.” Nico leans over and socks you on the shoulder.

“Ow, watch it. I am delicate.” You pout, pretending to be much more put out then you really are. Nico raises an eyebrow.

“You, delicate?” he says.

“I bruise easily. Like a peach.” You rub your shoulder again just for show. Nico rolls his eyes so hard you think they’ll roll right out of his head.

“Has anyone ever told you, you’re dramatic?” Nico says.

“Well, my father is patron god of drama, so I think I’m entitled to a little bit of flare now and then,” you say.

“You’re impossible. Isn’t it your turn to ask a question now?” Nico asks, and you nod.

“Hmm . . . That’s right.” You tap a finger on your chin thoughtfully, and try to think of what you want to know about Nico di Angelo.

The memory of his first night in the infirmary flashes through your mind. You remember him flickering in his sleep as a nightmare gripped him. He whispered a name, and you still don’t know who it belongs too.

The question sits on the tip of your tongue, burning its way through your lips. You know there is nothing you could do to stop it, but even as you speak the words you regret it. “Who is Bianca?”
The change is instantaneous. He sits up and whirls towards you. The soft lines of Nico’s face, relaxed under the light of the fireworks, suddenly grow taunt. Wrinkles rise on his forehead, deep and defined valleys of hurt and pain, and a little bit of anger. It’s like her name physically cuts him in a place where everyone can see. It’s no wonder he’s always been so closed lipped about himself. It’s no wonder that he hasn’t mentioned her sooner. You know what it’s like to have someone say a name, and for everything about them to come rushing back.

“How do you know her.” The tone of his voice is strange to you. He speaks flatly, like every emotion in him has died away and left only a hard grating edge. It rattles your bones. And then he looks at you. His eyes trail across your body, and in their wake you expect to feel the smooth kiss of steel, or perhaps to simply die, but he doesn’t move, and somehow that’s almost worst. There is something profoundly different about this Nico. He doesn’t seem like a fourteen-year-old boy anymore. It’s almost like he is death, rather than simply knowing it. He radiates a cold and powerful aura that chills you to the bone despite the hot August air.

The vacancy in his eyes scares you.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I’m-” His frown starts to turn into something a little more feral, so you skip ahead to the explanation. “You talk in your sleep. At the infirmary. I heard you say ‘Bianca’ and well I . . . I didn’t know any campers by that name and . . .” And you sounded so miserable, so in pain, that I wanted to wake you up, but I couldn’t even touch you, Nico. You were disappearing. Whatever this is, it’s devouring you. Let me know. I can’t help if I don’t know.

It’s almost like he can hear your thoughts because the chill in the air dissipates, and the fractured pieces of Nico’s eyes put themselves back together again. His body is still curled in on itself, and the tendons in his fingers are drawn tight against the skin of his hands like he’s ready to fight back if he needs too. But it’s different. This fear that Nico has now looks like human fear, not divine misery. Eventually his face relaxes and his eyes go a bit wide.

You wonder what he’s thinking, but he doesn’t really share.

Nico continues to stare at you with wary eyes. He opens his mouth, then closes it. He looks at the lake, the beach and the trees. He opens his mouth, and this time he speaks. “You were listening to me sleep.” The accusation is tinged more with confusion than anything.

“No, well yes. Sort of? I was finishing up some paperwork when I got a bad feeling. You were tossing and turning a lot, so I went over, and you were obviously having a nightmare. I tried to wake you up but you . . . You weren’t there. I mean you were, but my hand went right through you and you were gone for a second, like I blinked, but my eyes were wide open and the only thing you said was ‘Bianca, no’ so I . . . So I wanted to know who she was. I’m sorry if that’s really invasive, or if I made you uncomfortable.” You don’t want to look at Nico’s face and watch him struggle to bury the sadness that keeps bubbling to the surface, but you can’t look away either. Pins and needles prod at your conscious, sweat slips down the palm of your hand, and you need to be looking at him when he says . . . whatever he says next.

“She’s my sister,” he says. Nico sounds like a child. He’s never once sounded like a child to your ears. He’s sounded like a hero and war veteran, and someone who’s a lot older than they look, but never a child. His eyes turn out to the lake. The moon is reflected on its eerily calm surface, like the horizon somehow split your world in two. The fireworks certainly don’t make things any more calm.

“Sister?” you ask, and try to think of what you remember about Nico. He came to camp with another person, so maybe . . . Or wait, there was a Roman daughter of Hades right? “But, I thought your sister’s name was Hazel?” you ask, and Nico looks . . . guilty? You want a little more clarification on that, maybe, but before you can ask a question he speaks.
“No, Hazel is my half-sister. She’s from around the same time period as me, but she . . . I didn’t meet her until the Doors of Death were stuck open. Bianca was my biological sister. Same mom. She . . . When I was growing up, it was just us and my mom but . . . Mom died, and Dad sent us to the Lotus casino.” Nico screws his eyes shut like he’s trying to will away a memory.

“So that explains why you don’t look like you’re an old man,” you say and Nico snorts a dry, humorless laugh.

“Yeah. We had our memories wiped and enjoyed a month of drugged out, supernatural bliss until a furry dressed like a lawyer sent us to military school.” Nico rolls his shoulders and cracks his neck, as if the memory alone is enough to gear him up for a fight. “Monsters found us, Percy found us, Annabeth fell off a cliff, the Hunters escorted us to camp half-blood and then . . . And then things sort of went to Hades. Bianca left me. She joined the hunters, and I know that was her choice, and she deserved freedom, but I was still so young and so scared, and she was the only person I had left in my life.

“I was mad and I yelled at her, but before I could apologize she decided to leave on that stupid quest to put Atlas back under the fucking sky.” There is a long, long moment where Nico slowly draws a knife out of his boot and looks at it. You’re startled to realize that he just carries a knife around on his person at all times, but you suppose that, as a demigod, it’s not so strange. Still there is something unsettling about the image. Nico should care pencils, books, a cellphone, gum; these are things that teenagers have. Not knives.

“She died,” he says, voice breaking, “she took something from the junkyard of the gods for me. I . . . She got me a little figurine of Hades, from my favorite game, because she wanted to apologize to me. She died because she was more afraid of me being angry at her, or hating her, than she was of the wrath of the gods. And I . . . It was my fault; I shouldn’t have been so scared. I should have been able to tell her that I forgave her.” Nico stares with vacant eyes at the ground and shoves the knife into the sand. The shifting grains swallow it a few centimeters before Nico’s strength or will, or both, run out and then his hand falls away and the knife stands for a few seconds on its own. It barely makes a sound when it topples the ground.

“For most of my life Bianca was the only one to take care of me and to accept me. She protected me no matter what and then I . . . I thought I killed her. I couldn’t even talk to her ghost; she wouldn’t talk to me. I thought it was because she hated me, but she was just trying to force me to let go and move on. So yeah, that’s who Bianca is. I . . . Still have nightmares about her dying alone, about her being crushed to death, surrounded by strangers, because she was afraid that I . . . that I didn’t love her anymore. She was just twelve years old.” His voice dwindles to nothing more than a whisper by the time he finishes talking. You close your eyes and fall back against the ground, pretending that you don’t notice the tear tracks on Nico’s cheeks and trying your best not to cry too. You know enough about Nico and about grief in general to know that he doesn’t want your pity right now.

“I can’t say I know what it’s like to lose the most important person in life, but I do know what it’s like to lose family because you were afraid.” You swallow around the lump in your throat and remember something Michael told you once, when you kept asking questions about things the older campers didn’t want to talk about. He said ‘It’s a scar for a scar kid. Ask again when you have something to say. Someday, someone will cut a piece of their heart out and hand it to you, and you can’t give them pity or empty words in return. You’ve got to give them a piece of your own.’ Funny, Michael always seemed like he knew more than he was letting on. You wonder if he knew this would happen, or if he was just that wise.

“Did you ever meet Lee Fletcher?” You start out from the beginning, because as a child of the storytelling god, you have an obligation. Nico shakes his head.
“I’ve heard of him, though.”

“That makes sense. Lee didn’t have a presence like Michael did. He was subtle, but reassuring, like solid earth beneath your feet. When I arrived at camp a bunch of the older kids were out on some weird quest, so he gave me the official run down. He was twelve, but by far the most experienced in the cabin. Think like Annabeth, but quiet. And tired. He always seemed so tired.” You shake your head, giving up on trying to put Lee Fletcher into exact words.

“Anyway, he was the first person in Apollo I really thought of as family. Whatever skill I wanted to learn, he’d help me foster it. I was a disaster with a bow, but he managed to teach me the basics, and more importantly, he taught me how to teach. When I told him I wanted to be a doctor, he took me to the infirmary on his shifts. He was hard on me, but in the way he needed to be. He drilled into my head that I had the potential to be the closest thing anyone at the camp would ever come to a miracle if I did my job right, and the closest thing to an executioner if I did it wrong. It was a lot, but he always made me believe I could do it. He did it, and he believed I could do it so . . . So I learned. I learned fast, and I got really good. After a year of study, I assisted him with my first real surgery. It was terrifying, but Lee looked so calm and so in control, that I was able to keep my cool too.

“I assisted him a lot, but if Lee didn’t think the patient would survive he’d always have Michael escort me out of the room. I would always wine and drag my feet, saying that I’d be fine, but . . . My older siblings, they didn’t want me to have to see that. They were worried about what would happen if someone died in my hands. Anyway, I performed my first surgery on a kid who got mauled by this giant scorpion some asshole sword instructor let loose in the forest for kicks. Lee was watching over me the whole time, so it’s not like I was really doing it on my own. It was successful, so I thought I was totally ready to become head surgeon. I was so sure, I asked Lee when he thought I’d be ready to stick with a surgery all the way through. Lee just shook his head and told me: that’s not the type of thing you’re ever ready for.

“He died during the Battle of the Labyrinth. I don’t really know how it happened, but as soon as the troops pulled away I ran straight for the infirmary to set up for the rush of patients we were about to get. Lee almost always went ahead of me, but I figured I was just faster this time. I had kept to the edges for most of the fighting, so I got out quicker. Everyone kept bringing in patients. A lot of them were . . . my own siblings, but none of them were too badly injured. The worst was Austin. He had a compound fracture in his leg, I swear half his femur was sticking out. I panicked a little bit, but I figured that Lee would be there any second, so if I messed up he could fix it.

“But then he got there and I . . . Lee was covered in blood. I don’t know what happened. I think he must’ve been hit with shrapnel from a falling tree, because he had a lot of pieces sticking out. I don’t remember much about it, but I remember Michael laying his body down on the only clean operating table left, and I was just frozen there. Then Michael turned to me, while the rest of my siblings rushed towards him, and Michael yelled ‘Will, we need you. Please.’ But I . . . I hesitated. I just stood there, and then Michael said, something else, I don’t remember. Eventually I rushed forward, but my hands were shaking, and he . . . He held on for a while, but he had lost too much blood.

“When he flat lined I panicked and I ran. I threw up in a bush, and then I ran all the way into the middle of the forest where I had a panic attack. It was like I was drowning, only a few feet from the surface, and no matter how hard I fought I couldn’t get to the surface. I don’t know how long it took my siblings to find me, but I remember Kyla was the first. She wrapped me in her arms and sang, until I finally stopped hyperventilating.

“She sang Hallelujah. I remember that like it was yesterday. Her voice wasn’t loud, but it was so clear that I . . . Well I swear the gods heard her singing all the way up in Olympus. That’s how the others found us. We all sat on the forest floor and cried and . . . yeah.” You screw your eyes shut and
remember the tick-hot smell of blood that still lingered on the loamy earth. You remember Kyla, twelve years old, and so full of anguish that the nymphs came out of their trees and cried too. You remember the little ones, the ones who weren’t in the hospital trying to keep people together. You remember them clinging to the two of you. Victoria was there, and Chloe. Kyla sang that same song for hours and hours.

“Why did she sing Hallelujah?” Nico asks, in a quiet voice. You open up your eyes to a sky full of stars, and wonder how he picked that question. You don’t think you could handle talking about anything else, but music is something you understand.

“That was Lee’s favorite song. He would hum it under his breath at the weirdest times.” You laugh a little. “Sometimes he didn’t even know he was doing it.” It’s quiet again between the two of you. “I know it’s different, because I had my entire family around to hold me and to help me work through it, but I . . . I want to let you know that I understand, at least a little.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Nico says at long last. He shakes his head, picks up the knife, and stabs it into the ground with a little more force. This time it stays upright. “It’s not your fault. Will, you’re one of the best doctors I’ve ever seen, if you couldn’t do anything, then there was nothing to be done.” He seems pissed off about it, and you can help but smile a little bit.

“You know the worst part about being such a good doctor? I know now, that I could have saved him. Drew Tanaka came into the infirmary in almost the exact same condition during the Battle of Manhattan, and I saved her. Those precious few seconds, when I stood there, instead of stopping the bleeding, and calming the rest of the staff, cost him his life.” Nico doesn’t say anything as a heavy breeze rolls in from the lake. It’s not cool; it’s mostly just wet. Sometime between your question and the mess that followed, the fireworks had finished. A few kids are packing up, and heading back to their cabins, but there are just as many that stay on the bank of the lake with you, wringing the last of their summer out of the hours until curfew.

“Look at that,” you say gesturing to the stars, “we were having a perfectly wonderful time before I ruined it. But you know what?” you ask, and Nico looks at you like you might be crazy. “The sky has yet to fall, so this is going better than I thought it would.” Nico shorts a humorless laugh, and finally you loll your head to the side to look at him properly. The heavy bags under his eyes have eased away, just a little bit, and he doesn’t glow with a sickly green tint anymore. Instead the moonlight is almost angelic. Yeah, he still looks profoundly sad, but that’s the way with angels.

“You expected the sky to fall?” he asks, and you nod very seriously.

“Yeah, I was freaking out big time,” you say.

“You know, I used to think you were cool,” Nico says, “I thought you always looked really laid back, and very chill.”

“You have seen through my façade!” you announce, “I seem very chill, but I am almost always just screaming on the inside.” Nico shakes his head, a tiny flicker of a smile at the corner of his mouth. You want to kiss him till the smile spreads wide, but something tells you maybe now’s not exactly the best time for that.

“You didn’t ruin anything,” he says, brushing away your silly antics. “It’s good that I talked about it. I don’t really talk about her, and I probably should. I yelled at Jason about her once, but the only other person I ever talked about Bianca to was Hestia.”

“Hestia?” You know you heard him right, but you can’t quite believe it. “Like the goddess of the hearth, up in freaking Olympus, Hestia?”
“She’s everywhere there’s a home,” Nico says seriously, looking behind himself, in the direction of the hearth fire. “She sits next to the hearth at the pavilion.”

“I’ve never seen her,” you say. Well, you’ve never seen any of the gods, so that’s not a surprise.

“I just recognized her because she looked just like her figure from Mythomagic.” The tips of his ears burn with a pretty pink blush when he mentions this, and you can’t help but smile.

“Mythomagic? Yeah, Jason mentioned you liked that,” you say, turning on your side so you don’t have to sit with your head lolled to the side. Nico rolls his eyes when you mention Jason, though the blush on his face gets a little darker.

“Of course he did. That guy can’t keep his mouth shut. Mythomagic is a card game, but there are also figures and stuff. It’s about Greek Mythology.” He shrugs, like it’s nothing. You can tell by the way he weaves his fingers together that he’s nervous.

“Huh, I bet that came in handy.” You smile as broad and true as you can. Nico glances over at you, and then just as quickly looks away. The tiny smile at the corner of his mouth reaches up just a little bit more.

“I never seem to remember what’s important about the mythical creature in front of me until it tries to kill me so . . . not that useful.” He shrugs, but it’s carefree, like he’s trying to say what can you do?

“Is it fun?” you ask, because you like that easy little shrug. He looks like he thinks you might be making fun of him, but after a moment he answers.

“Yeah,” he says. There’s a spark in his eyes, and you think you would do anything just to see him look at you like that.

“Tell me about it,” you say. There’s a pause. Now he looks like he really doesn’t believe you.

“Really?” Everything about him defines skeptical, but your favorite part of his look is the arch of his eyebrow.

“Yeah, really. I don’t know anything about Mythomagic,” you say. There’s a few seconds, where Nico just looks at you, and you’re sure he’s not going to say anything. Then Nico nods, and then he starts talking. He starts talking like he just can’t stop. You watch him, only barely registering his words. Instead you’re captivated by the way he unwinds with every mention of attack points and special abilities. By the time he’s halfway to explaining something about how a character’s status affects their health he’s talking with his hands. In the month or so that you’ve gotten to know Nico, you had always gotten the impression that Nico was a pretty controlled person. He liked to keep his arms tucked in close to his body.

But now that you watch him, you realize that control might have been more a symptom than a trait. He’s talking with wide open stokes of his hand, like a painter. You can’t help but remember the big talking Italians from movies like The Godfather, and then you imagine Nico running around like that. He’d be so tiny compared to all of those great big gangsters. It makes you giggle, in a stupid schoolgirl way. When Nico catches you he swats at your shoulder and says “Stop laughing asshole. This was your idea.” You just nod and tell him to keep talking because you love it. You love the way he lights up like a Christmas tree. He oozes enthusiasm, and somewhere along the way you decided you want to play this game. You still have no idea what this game is about but you really want to play it.

Before Nico can even get to the rules of the game (he’s still talking about individual cards and their
powers and what makes a good hand), there’s a deafening screech.

“Shit,” you hiss, starting up. Nico’s already got his knife in his hand and he’s turned towards the sound of the noise by the time you clamber to your feet. “I can’t believe we stayed out after curfew. Oh man, the harpies are going to kill us.” You have been caught by the curfew harpies before and it is not a fun experience, not fun at all.

“Oh,” Nico says after a second. He relaxes back, and slips the knife into his boot. “For a second . . . I can’t believe I got so scared because of harpies.”

“Are you crazy? Lou, Cecil and I stayed out once because of a stupid meteor shower that was supposed to happen, and then didn’t even happen. We nearly died. I am so serious. We only escaped because there’s nothing faster on its feet than Lou Ellen. She distracted the harpy, Cecil and I bolted, and then she threw a smoke bomb and met us back at the Hermes cabin. I was so scared I stayed over there for the night.” You shiver, remembering how every little sound made you jump a mile high. You made such a racket that the Stoll brothers banned you for a month.

“Don’t you usually stay out late working at the infirmary?” Nico asked with a skeptical look.

“Yeah, but the harpies don’t patrol between the infirmary and the cabins. And I always hurry home anyway. The harpies are terrifying, why do you look like you’re about to laugh? Stop that.” Nico just shakes his head.

“I’ve got a trick.” There’s a mischievous gleam in his eyes again. “Come on.” He grabs your wrist and drags you off the lakeshore to the cover of the trees. “Try not to breath,” he mutters as your world slowly shrinks to the cool press of his hand against your wrist. Why is he still so cold? It’s august. It’s hot outside. But you also don’t mind. You wouldn’t mind if he never let go.

“Sure, no problem. Breathing is only a necessary bodily function,” you whisper. He shushes you just as three harpies settle down on the lakeshore. The harpies flutter around for a bit and you can’t imagine that this is going to work, except, well, it sort of does. The harpies flutter around on the lakeshore looking lost and a little peeved.

You look to Nico with a question perched on your tongue, but he just presses a slim white finger to his lips. When you turn back the harpies are closer, flapping their way down the beach towards you. One in particular seems fairly inquisitive. It flaps closer and closer to the tree line, until the harpy is only an inch away. Now you seriously don’t breath. The harpy’s breath ghosts over your face in long hot spurts. The air smells putrid, like rotting meat and burning hair.

You try to focus on the feeling of Nico’s hand around your pulse and not the harpy’s beady eyes staring directly into yours. You see its entire body tense up as it takes a step closer, but then the other harpies screech something awful. The curious one in front of you caws back and then flaps off. When silence descends over the lakefront again, the rush of relief leaves you breathless.

“Nico!” It’s all you can manage, and even that is half a laugh. He loosens his fingers around your wrist slowly, and shrugs. His eyes are focused on the ground, so you duck below the curtain of his bangs to look him in the eyes. You want him to see your smile, and to believe you when you say: “That was amazing! Nico, how did you do that?”

He straightens a bit and studies you for a moment.

“Didn’t you feel it?” he asks, and you blink rather stupidly.

“Feel what?” You felt Nico hold your hand. Well not your hand. Your wrist. It was close enough.
You also felt harpy breath, but that is way less pleasant.

“The shadows. We became part of the shadows. You should have felt cold, or empty,” he says. You’ve come to recognize the look on his face, when he talks about the death things. As much as you love everything about him, you hate this face. He looks like he’s waiting for you to grimace, or to shiver, and when you don’t he seems confused. The fact that he’s so used to people being afraid of him makes your stomach twist.

“Your hand was kind of cold, but Lou has really cold hands too so I didn’t really notice,” you say.

“Nothing. You didn’t feel anything? Not even sense of dread?” He almost seems worried now.

“I was sort of too focused on the harpies to notice. Why? Are you trying to determine the side effects of becoming one with the shadows?” You wiggled your fingers at him, and Nico just shakes his head.

“You’re a piece of work Solace.” He almost looks like he could laugh, but he reigns it in at the last moment.

“That says something coming from a guy like you, Spooks,” you say with a smile. Nico scoffs and socks you in the shoulder. Your stomach growls, and for a moment, you worry it’s loud enough to bring the harpies back. That’s what you get for skipping dinner.

“You a little hungry, Sunshine?” he asks with a teasing look on his face, and you shove him lightly.

“Shut up. I have a high metabolism. I need to eat a lot. Mind if we head over to the camp store?” You look down at your stomach, as if a glare could silence it.

“I don’t know if you noticed, but it’s the middle of the night. The camp store is closed,” he says.

“I spend a lot of time in the Hermes cabin. After a while, you learn that there is no such thing as closed,” you say.

“And if we get caught?” Nico asks.

“We already dodged the harpies. No one else is looking,” you say.

“You’re siblings aren’t wondering why you haven’t come home yet?” They’re pulling for me to go home with you tonight. I think they would be ecstatic if I didn’t come back.

“They’re used to having me out late at the infirmary. They won’t mind.” You nod your head in the direction of the camp store, and after a beat Nico follows.

The lock takes some finagling, but it pops open and the two of you slide in. There’s a microwave in the back, so you make the most of the microwave food, while Nico helps himself to some chips.

The two of you talk for hours, about everything and nothing. You tell him stories about the dumb things your siblings do, and in turn he tells you about the magical world outside of camp. You’ve never even been on a quest, but neither has Nico really. His stories aren’t so much about climbing the mountain, or vanquishing the beast, as they are about exploring. He tells you about the Underworld and how unimaginably huge it is. He says that it’s not just Asphodel and Elysium and the Fields of Punishment. There’s so much more. There are rivers, the Lythe and the Acheron, and the Styx, and huge sloping valleys. There are a hundred little tunnels, and even after the labyrinth collapsed, networks ran all around the country.
After a while you both get antsy just sitting around, so instead, you explore the camp in the few hours you have left of summer. You take him to the forest, and show him the big tree. He says he’s seen it before, but you just shake your head, and tell him to climb. The higher you two go, the more marks there are on the tree. Little Greek letters and hearts with initials are scribbled on the trunk and on branches. They’re pieces leftover from board lookouts over the centuries. He asks if you know what any of them mean, and while you’ve got a guess at a few, it’s nothing really concrete. Nico wiggles his knife out of his boot and spends a few minutes scratching a little skull and crossbones and a sun into the bark. It’s so cute you almost die.

Somewhere between bothering the naiads at the lake (who apparently don’t need to sleep) and sitting around the fire pit in the pavilion, Nico convinces you that sneaking into the Big House would be a great idea. You can’t stop snickering as you try to sneak your way through the quiet home. You’re sure that Chiron is going to appear at any moment and tear you a new one. That, or Argus will show up with his seven million eyes and murder the shit out of you. You tell Nico as much.

“Argus isn’t going to murder you,” he whispers with a little smile on his face.

“Come on, you’ve got to admit the guy’s at least a little murdery.” Nico snorts a laugh, and swats at you.

“Stop trying to make me laugh. We’re sneaking,” he says.

“Only you would think my legitimate fear of being murdered by a hundred eyed dude was a joke,” you say.

“He’s not such a bad guy. If anyone in his house is going to murder us it’s going to be Mr. D. Now shut up and follow me,” he says. You do as you’re told, and after a few minutes, you realize where exactly you’re headed.

The attic, in theory, is a mystical place filled with relics and ancient pieces of heroes long gone. In reality, it’s really just a normal attic, but instead of being filled with useless human shit, it’s filled with useless monster shit. You’ve got to say, you’re a little disappointed by the ambiance, but the actual relics are pretty cool once you take a closer look.

“This broke and got Leroy killed, 1999. Hey, I know him!” you say, picking up the sword plaque and blowing away the inch of dust accumulated on it.

“Are you serious?” Nico asks, and you nod.

“I don’t know him personally, but he’s in The Book.” Huh, so that’s what The Book meant by he was felled by his own sword. Funny, this plaque made his death seem a lot less poetic.

“What do you mean ‘the book’?” Nico asks as you set the plaque down.

“Oh, it’s an Apollo cabin thing. We write a page or so about every demigod that comes through our cabin after they leave or die. Being kids of the god of poetry, we all believe that you can immortalize someone through fiction.” You let your attention wander over all of the other relics.

“That’s . . . nice actually,” Nico says, and you shrug again.

“Apollo cabin has a lot of super old traditions. We're a little superstitious. Hey look a scarf!” In the dim light of the attic, the pink scarf seems to be glowing. Completely unaware of any potential danger, you pick it up and wrap it around your neck. “How do I look?”

“Will!” Nico hisses, waving his hand. Aw. He looks so cute when he’s distressed. “Take that thing
off!” You just laugh in response. Everything feels great all of a sudden.

“Oooh, you think I look better when I’m taking it off, I see,” you say. Your head feels like it’s filled up with sparkly pink cotton candy, but you really can’t focus on anything except the delicious blush spreading across Nico’s face.

“Will, listen to me. That is Aphrodite’s scarf. It is very powerful love magic,” Nico insists.

“Love?” you ask, watching the way he’s inching towards you. Wow he’s beautiful. “Hmmm, so I’m wrapped up in love right now?”

“Will!” He frowns, and looks completely helpless. Aw, poor Nico. Your heart kind of breaks at that look.

“Alright, alright. I’ll strip down if that’s what you want.” You sigh, loosening the scarf a bit as you saunter towards him. “But first . . . You have to answer my question.” Nico swallows and takes a step back for every one you take forward.

“What question?” he demands, looking both very uncomfortable and very confused.


“Um . . I . . .” Nico’s eyes are darting around everywhere but you.

“Do you think I’m pretty Nico?” Yyou ask, putting only the absolute minimal amount of space between your bodies before you lean and whisper against his ear. “Because I think that you’re pretty Nico.” Nico makes an absolutely delightful, strangled sounding noise, and then the light, airy feeling and the spark coursing through your veins disappears. Nico shoves you aside as he tosses the scarf far into the back of the attic. After it leaves his hand he shivers, and you blink back at him, trying to remember what was happening.

“See this,” Nico says gesturing to you, “this is why I told you to take off the dumb scarf.”

“Oh,” you say once your head finally settles down. A hot flush of embarrassment burns up your neck, all the way to the tips of your ears. “Shit.” Holy fucking shit. However, before the embarrassment can kill you, Nico snorts a laugh.

“Sorry,” he says after a moment, “Sorry it’s just . . . I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so embarrassed.” You relax back, comfortable that at least for the moment, your enormous infatuation remains a secret.

“Yeah, that magic scarf sure did a number on me.” Your laugh is a little forced, but if Nico notices he has the courtesy not to say anything.

“I used to mess around up here while my sister and everyone else were off on their quest. I know how much that scarf can really mess with your head. Grover once caught me, and when he grabbed the scarf to take it away, he got ensnared. I spent thirty minutes listening to him rhapsodize about someone named Juniper before I could finally tear it away and toss it aside,” he says, and you smile to yourself, imagining a ten year old Nico having to sit through Grover’s love-struck monologue.

“Well, thank the gods you knew what was going on,” you say with another slightly forced laugh, but you’ve relaxed enough that only Lou and Cecil would be able to tell it was forced. “But enough about magic artifacts. I’m guessing you didn’t bring me here to marvel over Nana’s chair,” you say,
gesturing to a dusty old stool that still has the old oracle’s butt print in it.

“Who?” he asks, turning and around and staring at the stool as if the answer was written somewhere in the butt print.

“Oh, me and my siblings used to call the Oracle, Nana. It’s another one of our traditions. The Oracle has always been like a weird, pseudo relative to us as Apollo’s chosen profit, so someone once called her Nana as a joke and it stuck. Before there were hoards of monsters dying within easy reach, the head surgeon’s job was to come up here and get whatever monster part they needed for a cure. They’d slip a golden drachma into Nana’s pocket as a show of good faith, so she wouldn’t curse them with some horrible prophesy of doom,” you say. Nico raises one eyebrow at you.

“You expect me to believe that story?” he asks, and you slap a hand over your heart in a show of offense.

“I’m being very serious here. You can ask Rachel. We tried to call her Nana too, but she was not having any of it,” you say. Nico gives you a skeptical look for just a moment longer, before he sighs.

“Whatever, just follow me.” He turns towards a particularly precarious stack of stuff and starts to climb it.

“Wait Nico-”

“I’ve done this before, don’t worry. Just watch exactly how I do it, and try not to touch that box, it’s full of dead spiders,” he says lightly, climbing to the top.

“Oh my gods, I could have lived my whole life without knowing that.” You avoid that box like the plague, and after a serious test of your nerves (everything creeks and groans, this is exactly 1235732 times more horrible than the climbing wall) you catch up to Nico. Right above you there’s a dusty old skylight. Nico jiggles the latch and gently pushes it open. Then he scrambles up onto the roof, and you take a moment to admire what a nice butt he has. Seriously, that’s excellent. He then reaches a hand down and you let him pull you up onto the roof.

The night sky is still a thick blue blanket, speckled with clear, bright stars. Nico shuffles down on the ceramic tiled roof a little ways and you follow suit.

The entire camp stretches out before the two of you, like a doll set someone put on their lawn. Everything is strangely still and silent without campers running back and forth. Come to think of it you don’t think you’ve ever seen the camp without anyone around. Even on lone nights when you were walking back from the infirmary, the light was almost always on in your cabin or someone was playing a soft love song from Aphrodite cabin, or a couple of Hermes kids were doing a night run. It’s strange, but it’s not bad, and you can’t help but think that this reminds you of Nico. The silence, and the dark, and the beauty; they all sit right with how you think about him.

On the horizon there’s a tiny strip of light blue, the beginnings of dawn.

You like this quiet moment. It sets you to thinking, and not in the way that usually demands answers. This is a place that’s special to Nico. It’s just far enough removed for you to look in, but it’s also undeniably a part of the camp. You wonder how many times he’d come up here for a moment of quite, or how often he just visited camp just to look at it from above, and then leave. You wonder how many sleepless nights felt a little less haunted when he sat and watched the sunrise.

When the sun finally sits fully atop the horizon, you close your eyes and whisper, “Welcome back, Dad.” Maybe Nico heard you, because he turns to you. He looks like he’s about to say something,
but he doesn’t.

“Hm?” you ask, and Nico just shakes his head.

“It was nothing,” he says, “Forget it.” You could press him now, and hear whatever he wanted to say, but that doesn’t feel right.

“Hey, can I check your vitals, one more time. Before I go,” you say instead. You don’t know why that comes out so halting and awkward. It must be this atmosphere.

“Sure.” He holds out his wrist and you take it gently in your hand. You can still feel a darkness inside of Nico, and you wonder if it will always be there, but the fact that you can feel it’s limits gives you hope that one day you will hold his hand like this, and all you will feel is life.

“You’re smiling,” Nico says, ”that’s good right?”

“You’re smiling,” you say, and a thought strikes you. You could kiss him. There’s hardly been a time when the two of you were alone together that you didn’t want to kiss him, but it’s never been a real possibility. His eyes are wide and he’s leaning towards you, just a bit. When you took his hand he didn’t flinch. There’s a real possibility that you could lean over and kiss him, and he wouldn’t pull away or get upset at you. “It’s really good.”

You release his hand and sit back.

Tonight you each carved out a little piece of your heart, and the edges are still raw. Maybe you’re just being a coward (you’ve always been a coward when it came to taking risks), but you think that would be a poor way to end things this summer. In a few hours, you’re getting on a plane to LAX and you won’t be back for months.

The two of you have plenty of time. This moment has all the bearings of the perfect intimate moment, but it doesn’t feel like the kind of moment to change things. You’ve been pretty good at knowing how to time things your whole life. You’ll know when the perfect moment comes. You can let this summer be the one where you became friends. You can be patient, and you can wait. Still . . .

“I don’t want to go back,” you groan lying down on the roof. Nico snorts a laugh and you pout at him. “Laugh all you want, but you’re not the one who has to take Physics next year. Ah and my mom is making me do AP too . . . I tried to convince the counselors to let me skip physics and do an internship at the hospital instead, but apparently Physics is a required course for graduation. Ah well, at least I’ll be in AP Chemistry too. That should be interesting.”

“You’re smart.” Nico looks astounded, and you laugh.

“You’ve obviously never talked to my math teachers.” You sigh, looking up at the big blue sky. “Yeah, I really don’t want to go back yet. Have you decided on what you’re going to do?”

“I’m staying here. It’d be nice to be near Reyna and Hazel, but New Rome is a lot,” Nico says, “Chiron’s going to arrange for some private tutoring to get me caught up on all the things I missed in the last 80 or so years.”

“That’s great Nico!” You can’t believe he’s really staying at camp. When you visit he’ll be here, and when you come back the next year he’ll be here too. “Make sure you watch all of the studio Gibli movies, and also the Breakfast Club.”
“I think this tutoring is going to involve things like, the Civil Rights movement and computers, but I’ll keep that in mind,” Nico says. The thought that you could kiss him goodbye flutters through your head again, but you ignore it.

“I’ll see you around, Spooks,” you say.

“You too, Sunshine.” Nico smiles right back, and in the light of the rising sun you swear he shines.

It takes two and a half hours to get everyone in your cabin who’s not staying the year packed and ready to go. Kyla spends the entire time bemoaning how much she doesn’t want to go back to Wyoming, the twins fight over every single article of clothing down to their socks, and Chloe loses her bow and Milo. Thankfully, Victoria is able to hunt him down, and with a lot of agonizing labor, and more stress than a sixteen year old boy like yourself should be subjected you, you and your family pile into the van headed for the airport. Lou and Cecil say goodbye at the door, and you promise to iris message them as soon as you get home and fill your mom in on everything that’s changed in just a few months.

“Will!” Kyla and her carry-on bag (which is way too big. You have no idea how they let her get that on the plane. You suspect some form of witchcraft, because seriously you could fit inside that bag) shove themselves into the seat next to you. “You didn’t come home last night,” she says.

“No I did not,” you say. You can’t help but snort a laugh at how blunt she is.

“You’re smiling,” she says.

“Yes,” you agree.

“You never smile on the last day,” she says, “you absolutely don’t smile on the bus, because you hate the airport, and you hate thinking about flying.” You nod. Kyla doesn’t stop leaning into your space, with that wide and exited smile on her face. When you just continue to look back at her, she shifts a bit and then says, “So?”

“So?” You parrot back. You know exactly what she wants you to say, but there is something infinitely more fun about making her work for it.

“So! . . . You know . . .” She makes a vague gesture to you, and you have to purse your lips to keep from laughing at her. “You didn’t come home . . . From your pseudo-date . . . did you and Nico like . . . You know.” You furrow your brows like you’re not quite sure what she’s trying to say. “I mean I’m not saying that you guys . . . you know, I mean Nico’s still like fourteen . . . Plus, that’d be moving a little fast, not that if you did, it would be a big deal . . . Well I mean it would, but . . . I’m not judging you or anything, I’m just saying . . .” Her voice trails off into a little awkward squeak. You’re about to die from suppressed laughter, and then she sucks in a deep breath and practically shouts, “DID YOU AND NICO GET TOGETHER?”

Half your siblings and a few other kids unfortunate enough to catch the first bus out of Camp all turn to stare at Kyla. Even under her deep summer tan, the blush on Kyla’s face is clear as day. You can’t help but laugh. She pinches your arm in retribution, but it barely hurts.

“Oh man I can’t believe you just shouted that.” You shake your head, and Kyla buries her head in
her hands.

“Well?” Jamie-Lyn asks as the twins lean over the back of your seat. Kyla peeks out from behind her fingers.

“Did you lay one on him?” Devereux asks. You shake your head.

“Nope,” you say. The twins look at each other, and Kyla’s hands drop from her face.

“What?!” Chloe spins around in the seat in front of you, nearly smacking the child of Athena sitting next to her. “What do you mean ‘nope’?! You didn’t kiss him? Did you even hold his hand?” You shake your head, and she collapses in a heap back into her chair.

“Then what’s the smile all about?” Kyla asks.

“I think he really likes me,” you say, and Kyla’s eyes go as wide as dinner plates. She settles back in her chair and sighs.

“You’ve really got it bad for him, don’t you,” she says.

“Yeah,” you say, “yeah, I do.”

Even as the bus takes you farther and farther away from camp, you can’t help the excited little buzzing in your chest. You’ll be back at camp for Thanksgiving break, and then again for Winter break. That’s still months away, but time flies when you’re at school. You’ve got a good feeling about this year. You can’t wait for things to get started.

. . . Of course, first you’re going to have to explain all this to your mom in a way that won’t make her want to ban you from going to camp for the rest of your life.

Chapter End Notes

I’m going to be real, I have no idea how old Bianca is. I’m just randomly guessing twelve. I’m on summer vacation, which means I don’t have any of my books so . . . I’m just winging it and using what I can get from the Wiki. Anyway I go back to school in about a week, which means that I’ll have a schedule, and thus, I’ll be a bit more productive on the story. Sorry this chapter’s taken so long. On the bright side, the next plot relevant chapter is going to be fun. We’ve hit the almost middle of the story. In the next two chapters or so, the plot is really going to get going.
Chapter Summary

Will tries to explain to his mother that the world almost ending at camp again this summer isn't as big a deal as one would probably think.

Chapter Notes

I almost forgot to post the bonus chapter, but since this is mostly just a headcannon and Will waxing poetical about Nico (like you really need more of that after the last chapter) I feel like it's forgiven.

Edit: Fixed some grammar stuff.

Your mother, Linda Solace, is the type of runaway-free-spirited child that abounded in the seventies, but she was born a decade too late, and instead spent her teen years struggling though the eighties with all the grace and humor of a hero from a brat-pack movie. It was a bad time to be studying fashion, but this did not stop your mother from doing what she wanted. The same could be said for time, religion, capitalism, social standards in general and probably the laws of physics too. Honestly, your mother is as tenacious as she is clever. If there’s a problem, your mother will find a way around it, or, at the very least, through it.

She grew up in the kind of family that preferred to seem good, rather than actually be good. The boys were upstanding young gentlemen who loved to engage in talks of politics, though not a one of them had ever read a political article of any kind. Grandma was a tight-lipped southern belle when it came to her own family matters, but loved nothing more than to voice her opinions on other people’s business, while Grandpa was a busy, busy man, who deeply believed in every word of the bible, except the parts where it talked about money being a corrupting influence. As the only girl in a family of four kids and the youngest, your mother was expected to grow up and become the sweet natured, prim and proper lady that your grandmother had always wanted.

Your mother, in characteristic fashion, opted to not do that. From a very early age your mother was loud. She liked to talk and she liked to let people know that she didn’t care if they didn’t like her. Her favorite place was the park just outside the library. In the summer it held ‘Shakespeare in the Park’ performances where armature actors would get dolled up in armature costumes and perform theatric miracles. It came as no surprise to anyone but her family when your mother joined theater. She started out as an actress, but soon she felt herself gravitating toward the costumes.

Like you said earlier, the eighties were a bad time to study fashion, but your mother came out nearly unscathed. Her only terrible carryover was the fact that she loved weird earrings, and had pierced her ears nine times. There was also the matter of the bird tattoo on her back shoulder, and the Lyra constellation on her collarbone, though you never thought of those as terrible. You always really liked them and secretly wanted a tattoo of your own, though you could never settle on what exactly you wanted. Anyway, as far as your mother’s family was concerned your mother was a liberal-
socialist-hippie-no-good-anarchist who was going to amount to nothing and end up pregnant. Well, they were right about the pregnant part.

Your mother actually did astoundingly well in costume design, and before long became known for her gorgeous period pieces and flashy performance costumes. If it needed to be big and eye catching your mother was the one people called. But before her career really took off, she worked as an assistant to a guy named Michael Kaplan. That was actually how she met your dad. It was on the set of Fight Club where they first met. According to your mother, she had mistaken Apollo for Brad Pitt, and had dragged him off to go get his makeup done. It led to a bit of an awkward shuffle when the real Brad Pitt showed up.

This, in turn, led to a whirlwind romance, in which you were conceived. It never really bothered your mother much that the only guy she really held down a steady relationship with was a god who disappeared shortly after. In fact, she was relived. Your mother had never imagined herself getting married, but she had always wanted a kid, so the whole thing worked out in her favor. Sure, the occasional monster attacks weren’t great, but your mother was a fast learner and as a costume designer she often carried around stranger things than a bronze knife, so no one asked many questions.

Her family, however, was not so relieved that their only daughter had actually ended up pregnant. One long and emotionally exhausting fight later; your mother was officially the family pariah. When you were born, things started to look up. It turns out you were a delightfully charming little angel. There was still some strain in the relationship between your mom and her family. They didn’t like that she didn’t force you to go to church, and let you wear whatever you wanted. However, you still went over to Grandma’s for Christmas, Thanks Giving, Easter, and two weeks in the summer before you went to camp half blood. Then, you turned out to be gay. Well, a socialist-liberal-good-for-nothing-anarchist-floosy of a daughter was bad enough, but the fact that she raised her son to be gay? Unacceptable. The year you turned twelve was the first year you didn’t go to Grandma’s for Christmas. If you’re being honest, you didn’t really care. Grandma was kind of a bitch, and your cousins were mean.

“How was camp?” your mom asks you over the kitchen counter. Your house isn’t very big, but what it lacks in size it makes up for in modernity. The bottom level is all open plan, with huge floor to ceiling glass windows everywhere you look. In the corner there’s a winding staircase that takes you up to the bedrooms. The bedrooms don’t have the same open plan, but there is a wall in your room that’s just one big window. Most of the time you have your blinds drawn across, but every once in a while you open them to look out over Beverly Hills.

“Kyla and Lou are as gross as ever, Austin’s still doing his poetry thing,” you say with a shrug. “We got a new camper named Milo, he’s like six and gets along great with Nissa.”

“How’s Cecil?” She’s making some kind of Indian food, you’re not quite sure what. All you know is that it involves a lot of spices.

“Still single and a master thief. He set the Demeter cabin on fire again.” You mom hums and nods.

“No one was hurt right?”

“Well, Katie Gardener nearly tore Cecil’s head off for it, but in the end he escaped.” She laughs at that, side eyeing you while cleaning off her knife.

“Well, I’m glad to know he’s okay. Did Lou and Cecil stay behind this year again?” You nod, leaning against the kitchen counter.
“Yeah. It was the usual.” She hums.

“Anything else interesting I should know about?” You wait a second, and try to decide whether or not you should tell her about the whole . . . war thing. She probably wants to know, but you also hate worrying her. You remember how shaken up she was after the battle of the Labyrinth, and then again after the battle of Manhattan. Still, she’d want to know.

“The mother of the Titans, Gaia, rose up from the earth to seek revenge for the defeat of her children, and summoned a bunch of Giants, also her children, to wreck the earth and all of humanity. Couple of crazy new kids showed up, one turned out to be a Big Three, you know those crazy powerful kids of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, and not only that but a Roman. Which is a thing now. Apparently there’s an entire other group of demigods here in California that are the Roman counterparts to our Greek camp. They live in a city called New Rome over in the Berkley Hills. They tried to wage war on our camp and kills us all, because apparently one of those crazy new kids blew up their town with a giant flying battle ship on accident, and a war monger named Octavian, who is also a son of Apollo, was crazy and apparently liked genocide.

“After that all of these kids from both camps went over to actual Greece, and did a lot of stuff, at some point they rescued this kid named Nico from a jar and found the lost Athena Parthenos. Then Nico and the Roman Praetor, which is like a queen or something, brought the statue back across the ocean while the other kids killed all the giants. But the Romans still tried to kill us. I had to deliver a baby while the Roman army was basically sitting on our front steps. Then Lou, Cecil and I tried to destroy these catapult things, Gaia woke up, all the seven kids from the prophecy magically appeared back at camp, I still don’t know how, Octavian got his cape stuck in a catapult and fired the stuff into the sky, where they had stolen Gaia and blew her to tiny bits, but also this kid named Leo, and they never even found a body to burn, there was just nothing.

“The Romans took over my hospital, but we taught them how to sing, and became kind of friends, and I had a conversation with the Roman Praetor about Sex Ed. Oh we found Percy by the way. I should have started with that. He was with the Romans, that was Hera’s fault, he was one of the seven. Also I discovered I have cool light powers and set a trireme on fire while pretending to be a pirate.” You flex your fingers nervously, as your mom slowly sets her knife down to look at you.

“Is there anything else I should know?” she asks carefully, eyes wide like she’s in a daze. You guess that was a lot to process at once.

“Well, there’s a boy I like,” you say. That, at least, your mother can normalize. She relaxes a fraction, smiles and asks:

“Oh really? Who is it?” You pick at the grout on the countertop for a moment. You wonder what he’s doing right now, if he’s eating properly, and if he’s getting enough sleep. You hope he’s getting out some. Studies actually show that vitamin D can greatly improve a person’s mood.

“His name is Nico.” You like saying his name in a context like this, it makes your cheeks red, and your heart beat a little faster. You wonder if the next time you come home from camp, you’ll be able to tell her he’s your boyfriend. You hope so.

“Wait, wasn’t he the one you said got rescued from a jar?” Your mother looks considerably less relaxed.

“Yeah. He’s the son of Hades. The spirits in the underworld call him the Ghost King, and he can summon skeletal armies by tearing fissures in the earth. He regularly visits Hades and he can teleport across the world by traveling through the shadows.” You look up, and notice that your mom looks a little pale.
“Oh?” she says. She comes around the side of the kitchen counter, and sits down heavily on a stool in front of the bar. Her hands are shaking a little bit. You take a breath, and look down at your hands. Nico’s not scary. He’s not. You know all of that stuff sounds bad, and like you should stay away from him, but he’s not bad. “Tell me about him.” You look up at your mom, her soft eyes, then down at her hands, still shaking a little, and then back up at her little half smile. She’s trying, you realize. She’s trying to push past all of this crazy for you.

“Yeah, he’s fourteen, pale as a sheet, with this messy mop of black hair and his favorite thing in the world is this card game called Mythomagic that’s basically like Yu-Gi-Oh but for mythology nerds,” you say, “he’s also tiny mom. He’s like, Lou’s height, but all skin and bones. Oh, and he is absolutely the least cooperative patient I have ever had. The things that come out of this boy’s mouth are absurd. He is just concentrated sarcasm and sass. I swear to the gods, you have no idea how much trouble it was just to get him to agree to three days of bed rest.” The words start to roll off your tongue, like it’s next to breathing.

You tell your mom about the good things.

“When he smiles mom, I wish you could see it. You know his last name is di Angelo? Like an angel mom, like real honest to gods angel.”

You tell her the not so good things too.

“When he’s upset, he curls in on himself, like he’s trying to make himself so small he’d disappear. He doesn’t look up, and he won’t look at you, you have to get under his gaze, to let him know you’re there, and even then . . . He has the worst nightmares too, mom.”

You tell her where he came from.

“Venice, the Venice, Italy! Can you imagine Venice in the nineteen forties? It bet it was beautiful.”

You tell her how you really met for the first time.

“He was standing in the archery field, trying hold his bow like you see in bad movies.”

And you tell her how you first started to become friends.

“And then he had the nerve to look at me, and just go “you painted your face but you didn’t cover that mop of blond hair”, while he was wearing this super tacky Hawaiian shirt. Can you believe it?”

By the time you’re finished it’s nearly midnight, and you’re starving and your voice raw, and you feel like you’ve run a mile. But, for the first time you realize that maybe you’re starting to understand Nico, and that maybe you really do know him. It sets something inside of you at ease. All that worry you had, and the need to keep waiting . . . Maybe you don’t have to wait so much anymore.

When you’re finished, your mom gets up and wraps in a hug. She rests her head against your shoulder, and sighs.

“He sounds amazing,” she says. You nod as much as you can without disturbing her.

“He is mom, he really is. He’s been through so much, and he’s so strong and. Wow. He’s just wow, mom.” Swallowing feels like drinking sand, but you don’t mind.

“So,” your mom speaks into your shoulder after a couple of quiet moments, “Do you think you have a chance?” You snort a laugh.
“I don’t have a shot in Hades, but I’m going to try.” She releases you, laughing too and ruffling your hair.

“That’s my boy,” she says before getting to her feet. “Well, I don’t know about you but I don’t want to finish cooking. Wanna order Pizza?” she asks, and you nod emphatically.

“Hell yes.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

So the next two chapters were originally one chapter, but around 20k I figured that was way too much, so I split it into two. The next chapter should be out sometime next week if all goes according to plan. Anyway, please enjoy "Will Has A Shitty Year pt.1"

Edit: I can't fucking believe I put the wrong chapter on this thing the first time. I am so sorry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The great thing about living in L.A. as a demigod is that so many people have cellphones and are constantly using said cellphones, that carrying and using one doesn’t really make you a target for monsters. Sure, they get annoyed, but there are millions of teenagers constantly on their cellphones. As long as you don’t use it for more than a few minutes at a time, and don’t make more than one call from the same place, cellphone use is pretty safe. This is why you have your mom’s phone with you at school. (She always carries a second one for work and you return the phone as soon as you’re home.)

The bad thing about living in L.A. as a teenager, is that so many kids have phones, and are constantly using said phones, that all of the teachers have a preternatural sensing ability that activates as soon as the school bell rings. You would find it impressive if it wasn’t such a pain in the ass. Even if you just have your phone set out on your lap, and are checking the weather in New York, and it’s the first day of class, the teacher will know and they will take your phone. It is horrible.

“Fitzwilliam Solace.” Your new teacher for English literature does not, in any way shape or form, resemble any of the other English teachers you’ve had. For the most part your English teachers were rickety old women who had been teaching at whatever private school you’re going to since Nixon was in office. They usually wear sweater vests with weird and unnecessary faces of cats scattered across them. More often than not their voices could break glass and everywhere they go there’s a sort of thumping-scraping noise as they shuffle across the floor.

Your new English teacher moves like a monster. She’s as silent as the grave, and perhaps you could forgive that if your battle senses didn’t go haywire every time she so much as twitched. She speaks in a voice that reminds you of your mother’s, but also of Lee’s when he would explain things to you on his rounds at the infirmary, and of Cecil and Lou Ellen promising to protect you during your first year at camp. There’s no distinct tone about it that makes you remember your friends and family, but the quality is the same. She speaks to you as if she has known you all your life, and it bothers you. The only thing more unsettling then her voice is the fact that she is cloaked from head to toe in a black veil. You can’t see her eyes. Something tells you, that you wouldn’t want to see them, but not being able to is driving you crazy.

“Yes ma’am?” you ask, jolting up in your seat. You idly trace Greek letters on your desk to keep your hands from tying themselves in knots.

“I believe the correct response is ‘present’, ” she says. Her voice is smiling, even if her face is not.
There is a sheet in her spidery white hands, probably roll call.

“Sorry.” You smile, and detach your hand from your phone long enough to nervously run it through your hair. “Only my mom ever calls me Fitzwilliam, and only when I’m in trouble.” There’s a bit of snickering in the class behind you, but you don’t really mind. You would laugh too. Fitzwilliam is a dumb name.

“Perhaps it would behoove you to pay a little less attention to your phone. Cellphones aren’t good for people like you, you know,” she says, and you freeze.

“What?” It’s not really the most intelligent thing to say, but you can’t help it.

“Cellphone use by teenagers leads directly to a decreased ability to concentrate on a single task for long periods of time,” she says, and tilts her head to the side.

“Oh . . . Right.” You can’t shake the feeling that there’s something wrong about her. “Well, I’m already ADHD. I kind of have that market cornered,” you say. She hums.

“Regardless, I suggest you put your phone away,” she says and then she continues to list off names. Finally she turns to the board, and you feel a little bit of tension ease away. You’re pretty good with riddles and puzzles, so whatever name this lady chooses, you’ll be able to find out who she really is.

Instead of any pun, or maybe just her real name, all the woman writes is Ms. M.

“What’s your full name?” One of the other kids in the class asks, and you sigh in relief.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” she says with a light laugh. “It’s horrible to pronounce. Even I have trouble with it.”

You hold in a groan and turn your head to look out the window so your teacher won’t see you glaring daggers at her. A dove flutters onto the windowsill. You try to shoo it away, but all it does is tilt its head to the side.

You cannot wait to get out of this class.

. . .

You have never once called the Jackson residence, but then again, desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Hello?” Ms. Jackson answers the phone with a reasonable amount of suspicion.

“Hi, Ms. Jackson. My name is Will Solace, I’m a friend of Percy’s,” you say. When all that gives you is a beat of silence you add, “from camp.” Ms. Jackson lets out a short little panicked breath.

“Is something wrong?” she asks, and you can tell without looking that she’s got a death grip on the phone.

“It’s nothing you should worry about ma’am. There’s no prophecy of doom or anything. I just wanted Percy’s advice on something . . . Is he home?” There are a couple beats of silence before Ms. Jackson sighs.
“Yes, yes he’s home. I’ll go get him.” You can hear her call his name on the other end of the line, then a few footsteps and some muffled talking and finally:

“Hey Will, what’s wrong?” he asks, sounding more confused than put out.

“I’ve got a monster question that I think you’d be the most help with,” you say, running over the memory of your new teacher again.

“Sure, but you know you can just Iris Message me directly, right? You kind of freaked out my mom,” he says, and you grimace.

“Sorry. I heard that Annabeth was going to a boarding school near you and since Iris Message doesn’t exactly have a ‘knock’ feature . . .” You can hear Percy making a sort of strangled/nervous noise on the other end of the line. He clears his throat before he responds.

“Yeah that’s . . . that’s probably for the best. So, uh, what’s your monster problem?” He sounds a little too casual about the whole ‘monster in my school’ thing for your taste, but then again, he’s probably used it by now. You’ve never had to deal with a monster before, and if it turns out she’s who you think she is, there is a high probably you won’t get a second chance.

“I think my teacher might be Medusa,” you say in a rush, and Percy lets out a low breath, contorted by technology into a flurry of scratchy static.

“Alright.” His voice is as deadly serious as the day he asked you to save Annabeth’s life at the Battle of Manhattan. “What makes you think she’s Medusa?”

“She goes by ‘Ms. M’ and is wearing a black veil from head to toe,” you say. Percy is quiet for a few minutes.

“Is her voice sickly sweet?” He sounds about ready to hop and a plane and take care of this monster problem himself. You wish he would. You’re not entirely sure how you’re going to deal with this monster, considering how painfully average you are with a sword. Not to mention you don’t have a cool pen sword that you can just take to school.

“Well . . . Sort of? It just sounds . . . Her voice reminds me of all the most important people in my life . . . does that make sense?” It sounded ridiculous in your head, but now that you’ve said it out loud it seems more right.

“What?”

“The way she talks, it’s like she’s an old relative of mine. She talks to me like she’s fond of me.” You fiddle with the cord of your home phone, twirling it around your finger.

“Hmm . . . Well, when she tells you to do things, does it make you want to go to sleep. Or maybe to just sit and do whatever she tells you to do?”

“No, it kind of just makes me want to punch her.”

“Well, does she have a Middle Eastern accent of some kind?” You can feel that he’s starting to get a little confused, and you were dreading this. Why can’t the answers in your life ever be simple?

“No. She doesn’t sound like she has an accent of any kind.”

“Huh.” His little puzzled breath winds through the phone line as a cloud of static, “but she knew your full name right?”
“Well that’s the funny thing . . .” You try and find a way to explain your name without it being weird, but nothing comes to mind. “She called me Fitzwilliam.” There’s a tiny spurt of laughter.

“. . . Is that your full name?” he asks, after he has calmed himself down a bit.

“Yes and no. Fitzwilliam is what my mom calls me. She named me after Darcy from Pride and Prejudice, but she didn’t want me to get bullied on the playground, so she had them put William on my birth certificate,” you say. There’s a thoughtful pause on the other end of the line.

“Who knows that your name is Fitzwilliam?” he asks.

“Only my mom . . . And I guess you know now too,” you say. “And my whole class, since she called me that during roll call.”

“Have other monsters called you Fitzwilliam?” You shake your head and then remember that he can’t see you.

“I don’t exactly get a lot of one on one time with monsters, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Have you considered the possibility that she’s a goddess?” he says this very carefully, like even thinking about it might make a bolt of lightning crash into the earth.

“I thought that maybe she was a Muse, but she didn’t once ask me about Austin, not even indirectly.”

“. . . and that’s a giveaway for the Muses?”

“Yeah. It’s this whole thing. They send him fan mail.” You have never understood it, but the cakes and leather bound first editions they send him don’t lie. “Besides I’m not . . . I’m not really good with the whole poetry and art thing. I don’t know why a Muse would take an interest in me. They always stick together too, at least according to Austin.” Percy is quiet again for a few minutes.

“Well, I can tell you that she’s probably not Medusa,” he says it like that is the most sound and sage piece of logic he has ever come up with. You cannot believe that the Romans made this boy Praetor.

“Alright thanks.” You’re about to hang up, when Percy tells you something else.

“If she hasn’t tried to kill you yet, she probably doesn’t want to kill you,” he says. “I know most things in the world want to kill a demigod, but some things don’t.” You remember that his brother is a Cyclops, and hope that he’s right about Ms. M.

“Hm, I guess you’re right. Thanks again.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Something about your teacher still doesn’t sit right with you, but there’s not exactly much you can do.

. . .

It turns out that your new teacher is also the new theater instructor.
“Spring Awakening?” you ask. She stopped you after class to hand you the audition packet.

“I hope I’m not being too forward, but . . . I heard you singing some of it the other day.” At least she sounds sincere, and her hands are clasped together in a way that seems almost . . . hopeful.

“Um . . .”

“Don’t feel any pressure,” she says, and that takes you back a bit.

“Oh no, it’s not that it’s just . . . How did you get the school to approve this? Spring Awakening is not exactly PG.” You look over the booklet in your hand. She wrote your name at the top of the paper. More specifically she wrote William Solace. Not Fitzwilliam.

“I told them that it was a very important musical about growing up, and they approved,” she says. You nod carefully.

“I was actually just planning on showing up to auditions, but thanks for the heads up,” you say, shoving it into your backpack.

“It’s no problem, Will. You should have fun while you still can.” There she goes again, sounding a little too fond. Not to mention that line was really creepy.

“I’ve got plenty of time to have fun,” you say, “I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.” It seems like as soon as you’re sure you were mistaken, she does something that puts you back on edge. Ms. M’s shoulders sag, and after a beat she nods.

“I know. It may seem like you’re still so young, but time moves faster than you think. Soon you’ll be an adult.” Well when she puts it that way, it doesn’t sound as creepy.

“Sure . . .” You leave after that, and even from the safety of your car, you still feel like she’s watching you.

You come home from rehearsal the Monday before Thanksgiving all buzzed. You’ll pack tonight, and then Tuesday you’ll double check your boarding pass, and the flight weather. New York has snow sometimes during Thanksgiving, so you remind yourself to bring warm boots, and a great bit coat. You hate being cold, but frigid weather is all that stands between you and a week catching up with your friends. You, Lou and Cecil regularly Iris Message (and sometimes Cecil steals a phone while he’s making a run into the city to send snapchats to your Mom’s phone), but it’s not the same as being with them in person. Plus you’ll get to see Nico. You can’t wait to see how he’s doing, and how much he’s learned.

You’re in such a good mood, that even after you spent hours belting your voice raw during rehearsal, you’re still singing the songs quietly under your breath. Just as you’re setting your backpack down on your bed and contemplating a quick nap before you start your homework, there’s a crash from downstairs.

You take the stairs two at a time as the worst-case scenario blares through your mind. When you
finally find you mother she’s alone. One hand is coiled white-knuckled around a phone, and the other is pressed over her mouth.

“Mom?” you ask quietly. Your body is shaking as the adrenaline pumps through your veins. There are shattered pieces of blue china on the floor and daffodil petals, and water too. That was the noise. There’s no blood on your mother. You can’t imagine what happened and in the few seconds between when you ask your question, and when she answers, you end up staring dumbly at the slow moving glide of the water puddle. Finally she lifts eyes filled with glassy tears.

“Will . . .” she says, “Your grandfather is dead.”

The relief that statement brings is tragic at the least. She’s fine, you’re mother’s fine, there are no monsters. But on the other hand, you didn’t even know your grandfather was sick. Part of you still remembers him smiling at you when you were just a little kid. The other part remembers his scowl when he found out you had a crush on a boy named James at your school.

“Oh.” It’s all you can manage.

“Your grandmother wants us to come home for Thanksgiving . . . to sort out his will.” She carefully stands and presses the phone into the receiver. You guess Grandma hung up first.


“I’m sorry sweetie.” You know she’s asking you to go with her, because she can’t do it on her own, but a savage and childish part of you wants to lash back. It’s not fair. You were looking forward to going to camp. “I know your friends there are like family but . . . But they’re family too.” Your family, you think bitterly. But her plea is enough to break you.

This is an opportunity for your mother to mend her family. How could you deny her that?

. . .

The adults agree that Grandpa will be cremated quietly, and then they’ll hold a memorial service for him in December, just before the holidays. Apparently Grandpa always liked Christmas.

“You okay?” your mom asks on Saturday, when you’re finally driving back home. You’ve been quiet the whole ride, and haven’t touched the radio once.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just distracted.” you click the phone in your hand off.

“Did Cecil send one of those pictures?” she asks, and you fake a smile.

“No, I was just checking the weather,” you say, “it’s snowing in New York.”

Your mother is quiet.

“I’m sorry,” she says. You force a laugh.

“Don’t be. I hate the snow.” Your mother reaches for the radio, but her hand jerks to a stop half way there, and returns to the steering wheel.
“Grandma wants us to stay for the holidays, what with Grandpa’s service being the 20th,” she says. Your heart breaks.

“Good,” you say, “I hate the snow.”

The opening night of Spring Awakening is a roaring success. They write about it in the local papers. Ms. M really isn’t that great of a theater instructor, but you’ve done enough plays, and she gets enough money, that between the two of you, it’s brilliant.

You wish someone you loved had seen it.

Your mom goes to the matinee on Sunday. She loves it. She brings you flowers. The show runs for another week and she comes to see it at the next matinee too.

There’s only a few weeks until Winter Break.

You don’t hold your breath.

“Wait what do you mean you’re not coming for Winter Break?” Cecil stares at you through the hazy mist of the Iris Message like you’ve gone insane. Lou just sits there. The two of them are propped up on Lou’s bed in Hecate cabin. Inside it’s dark, and there’s a strange purple smoke that seems to be filing the air, but at least it’s quiet.

“My Grandpa’s memorial service is the 20th, so we’re going up as soon as I’m finished with finals, and staying through New Years. Grandma says she wants the family to come together at this ‘important time’.” You drum your fingers on your knees to no particular beat.

“But you already missed the acappella competition! The Argonauts got creamed without you man.” He sounds downright anguish, and as your acappella group’s self-declared manager, you suppose he has a right to be upset.

“I know, sorry.” This is hard for you, but you know they miss you too.

“You missed Thanksgiving, you can’t skip out on Winter Break.” He looks about ready to reach right through and pull you to camp, and you wish he would. “Everyone looks forward to you coming back. Even Chiron seemed disappointed when you didn’t come back for Thanksgiving. We miss you.”

“I know,” you say, but Cecil is still pushing and you just wish he would shut up.

“Can’t you talk to your mom? You hate your family, I’m sure there’s something-”

“Cecil, stop it.” Lou speaks up for the first time in what feels like an hour. “Just stop it.” Cecil snaps
his mouth shut and looks off to the side.

“Lou . . .” you say, helpless and frustrated. You don’t know what you should say to her, and that fact kills you inside. Finally she sits up straight and looks you in the eye.

“If there was a way to come back without hurting his mom, he would have found it. This is an opportunity for him. He has family out in the real world. That’s important,” she says. There are big glassy tears in her eyes. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

“Thanks,” you say, and another four months seems like an eternity. Cecil cuts off the feed before someone starts bawling. You’re not sure if you’re thankful for that.

. . .

“Will,” Ms. M catches you as you leave on the last day of class before Winter Break. It’s funny, with everything going on with your family and school; you had sort of forgotten that you were supposed to be worried about her murdering you. “Are you alright?” she asks. She weaves her long white hands together as if they were strings in a tapestry.

“Fine, yeah. I’m fine.” You plaster a smile on your face and wonder if it would be too much to ask if she really were an evil monster. You’ve never been particularly inclined to violence, but stabbing something splay out on her desk, and you’re struck by the odd notion that she would make an excellent pianist. Her fingers are so long and thin, you bet she could put Rachmaninoff to shame.

“Hmm . . . alright. Well, if there’s anything you need to talk about let me know.” She’s obviously picked up on your terrible lie, but it appears she has the grace to leave you be.

A twinge of guilt curls itself up in the pit of your stomach for hoping she would be evil. Then a thought pops into your head.

“Actually . . . There is something I wanted to ask you,” you say carefully. She perks up, sitting straight in her chair.

“Go ahead.” Her head tilts to the side, and you bet she’s smiling behind the black veil.

“How did you know that my mother calls me Fitzwilliam? I thought monsters were always supposed to call you by your first name,” you ask, and while she doesn’t shrink back per say, she’s not as excited as she appeared earlier.

“Oh,” she said quietly, “and here I thought you had forgotten.” Something about that statement itches at the back of your mind. You feel like it can’t be true, but you couldn’t say why.

“Did you really?” you ask, and she huffs out a brittle laugh.

“No . . . Not really. I should have known you wouldn’t be content to just wait things out.” Her voice is fond again, as if you are a wayward child, and this poking and prodding at her identity was simply an endearing little nuisance.
“What are you?” you ask, and now she sinks in her chair a bit.

“’What?’ . . . I believe you mean ‘Who’.” She weaves her fingers together again, but this time they’re more like a tight knot than a tapestry.

“Well I can’t be sure of what’s under that veil,” you say. She stiffens, sitting up straight.

“You see a veil?” she asks. You pause for a moment, and then nod. “I see.” Ms. M sits back in her chair like she’s tired. Maybe she is, you don’t really know. “I can’t tell you my name, you have to find that out for yourself. When you know, my veil will lift.” She sighs. “There is still time.”

“Is this supposed to me some kind of trick?’ you ask with your fists curled up at your side.

“It’s not a trick. You of all people should know the power of a word, especially a name. After all, you are of Apollo’s blood,” she says. That throws you for a loop. You know that if she knew your name, she probably knew you were a half-blood and well, you look like Apollo . . . Still it unsettles you that she knows about such a fundamental part of your life.

“What do you want?” you demand. Ms. M is very still.

“I just want to live in peace.” She sounds heartbroken, and for a moment that tinge of guilt curls in the pit of your stomach again. You suppose that even a monster would get tired of being hunted.

“Alright. I guess I should keep you a secret?” you venture, and her shoulders relax.

“I would prefer it be so, but I doubt that you’ve kept my existence to yourself.” Her voice is back to being filled with sweet fondness.

“I’ve only told Percy, to ask if you were Medusa.” At that she laughs, light and free. So, you guess that answers that question. “But if he asks, I’ll just tell him I took care of it, and not to worry.” Ms. M inclines her head, and you take that as your exit cue.

“Wait, Will! There is one last thing. If there is something you need to tell someone, I suggest you say it before the New Year.” Something about that warning makes you shiver. She sounds so eerily like the time Nana came into the middle of the forest to give the head huntress a quest.

“I will.” Even as you say it, you’re not quite sure what that means. “Have a good break, Ms. M.”

“Have fun, Will,” she says. A breeze blows in through the window, and ruffles her veil, lifting it just enough to reveal a bit of her neck and the edge of her jaw. For a moment, her name sits on the tip of your tongue. Her veil settles back down and the name escapes you.

. . .

You turn the radio on that afternoon, as your mother starts the drive up to San Francisco. When a good song comes along, you sing to it. It’s less for fun, and more to calm your nerves. It’s been about four years since you last saw all of your family gathered in one place. During Thanksgiving it was really just Grandma, and occasionally one of your uncles. A nervous buzzing runs underneath your skin.

No matter how long you listen to the radio, it doesn’t sooth you like it should. The buzzing is still
there as you pull up to the enormous old family home.

You’re thankful that no one asks you to say a word about Grandpa during the memorial. You cousins all seem to have something to say. They talk and they talk, but it doesn't mean anything. Their anecdotes are nothing but empty word sounds, lingering in the church, joining the images of saints among the rafters, where they crowd out the air. Without any meaning to deliver, those stories linger, waiting for the slow drag of time to tear them apart. It makes your heart ache for silence. You want to run. You want go, to get up and feel your body moving, escaping, to sit on the roof of the Big House and feel the tension that never quite leaves your surgeon's hands unwind, to let your breathing run quick or sporadic when you chase your family or laugh at your friends, to see Nico's smile and feel your mind settle.

But you push through, and finally familiar strangers spread Grandpa's ashes over clean cut flower beds, and then the whole church gets up and follows you home.

On the night of the Winter Solstice you duck out of the third story window, and climb your way onto the roof. The street lamps throw circles of sickly orange light, among the blue night air, flickering in time with the minute hand on your watch as it ticks towards midnight. Even San Francisco has a tinge of winter to it this time of year, but it’s nowhere near the frigid hell-scape that camp becomes in the winter. The bare skin of your arms pricks when the wind picks up, but you’d rather shiver than slink back inside. So you sit out on the roof, and inspect the purple bruise blooming just below your shoulder, courtesy of your cousin Chadwick.

He hits harder than the Aries kids, and over things twice as stupid. Punching someone because they called you a homophobe is not exactly the best way to prove that you are not, in fact, a homophobe. You prod at it some more, and think about just singing a hymn until the bruise fades, but the sick sting of it reminds you of camp. After a moment you decide you kind of like it. It’s like a badge of honor.

When the sun rises over the horizon, you close your eyes.

“Welcome back, Dad,” you whisper, and for a moment you swear that you can feel the soul-deep shine of summer sun press across your skin. Maybe it's a lucky warm breeze, or maybe it's just the clichéd poetics of a rising run. Maybe tonight you’ll Iris Message Cecil and Lou. You haven’t spoken to them since that . . . Well it wasn’t quite a fight.

There’s a spray bottle in the third floor vanity and you still have a few drachmas. No one would bother you up here. You make it a priority.
The silence looming over Christmas dinner is broken only intermediate by the sound of the good silver screeching against the good china. Funny . . It’s almost like no one wants to be there.

Your mom promises to take you to the movies the next day, but your car starts doing an impression of a garbage disposal with a spoon inside so your mom asks for a rain check until she can figure it out. You wish she would just swallow her pride and take it too a gods damned mechanic. Then again, you’re not really one to talk about pride, so you keep your lips sealed and wait for her to realize that she knows absolutely nothing about car mechanics.

. . .

Cecil and Lou start frantically texting you the day before New Years while you’re in the middle of a family game of poker. You’re not good at poker, per say, but you’re not bad either. Honestly you wish you were worse. If someone could clean you out, you could go do literally anything else. Maybe you could watch paint dry. Unfortunately you win big just about as often as you lose big. Grandma has been too testy recently for you to just quit.

“Who the hell is texting you so much?” Chadwick demands once it chimes for the fifth time. You have learned in the few days that you have been here, that Chadwick is the future heir to the asshole throne. Now with Grandpa out of the way, the only thing standing between him and the dick crown, is his father, Gregory. You believe that at the rate Chadwick has been ruining your life, he’s going to usurp his father.

“My friends,” you answer simply, slipping your phone out of your pocket and checking the latest message. It consists of a plane emoji, a person wearing sunglasses, a person flipping her hair, a few prayer emojis and a bunch of thumbs up and sparkles. You regret introducing Cecil to emojis.

“Why the fuck is your phone case pink?!” Chadwick reels back like the color has physically assaulted him.

“Language!” You grandmother squawks. She reminds you of the harpies at camp, except that she would lecture you to death, rather than mercifully slitting your throat.

“Why the frick is your phone case pink?” he amends and you can’t believe he is fucking serious right now.

“Because it is technically my mother’s phone. She lends it to me so I can keep in touch with my friends sometimes.” Honestly, you sort of stole the phone from your mom. You’re not supposed to use it a lot in one place, because monsters, but there is definitely a large part of you that is hoping monsters will attack. Then you would have an excuse to go to Camp Jupiter and be around anyone but your family. You would rather pick a fight with Praetor Reyna than stay here.

“And you leave the case on?” He sounds so aghast that you want to bang your head against the table.

“Yes,” you practically hiss.

“That’s gay,” he says, and oh my gods, this is why you called him a homophobe.
“No, sticking my tongue down Riley Miller’s throat at the after party of the musical I stared in, was gay. This is pink.” You wave the phone in front of his face, wondering if you could use this phone like one would use garlic to ward off vampires.

“William!” your grandmother shrieks again. You worry for the glass in the windowpanes. “You will refrain from speaking of your indecencies!”

“It was a game of truth or dare Grandma,” you sigh. Then your phone chimes four times in rapid succession and you take a second to check it. You read the top most one, but it’s just a bunch of exclamation points. Then another text comes in, that is just a frantic: Will are you there?

“Don’t check your phone while you’re at the table!” Grandma squawks.

“Chill Grandma, I think it’s an emergency.” You go to the little messages app while the rest of your extended family sits in stunned silence. You suppose no one has ever told Grandma to chill before. It’s a shame really.

You send a quick ‘hold on a second’ message, because they keep sending messages and it makes it hard to read the ones at the bottom. The texts stop just long enough for you to read something about going to New Rome for the New Year as a cultural exchange. Your heart leaps into your throat.

“Will! Listen to me!” Your grandmother’s shrieks pierce your happy little bubble for a moment, but you’re too excited to let her get to you.

“I’m busy Grandma.”

Is it true? you send. You wait with baited breath. There’s a quick response.

Check Snapchat. You do as you’re told, and notice there’s a new video. The rest of the table’s occupants barely register as background noise.

“We’re going to California!” Cecil and Lou Ellen shout at the camera while a disgruntled looking Nico scowls between them. You have no idea how they got him to sit still for that little video, but it makes your heart leap.

“Have any of you seen Linda’s phone?” Uncle Gregory, the asshole king himself, barges into the kitchen. “She can’t find it anywhere. She had to go drop off the car with her work phone.” You start out of your reverie, slipping your phone into your lap. You’re about to excuse yourself from the table to avoid this confrontation, but before you can so much as think of an excuse, your phone pings with another new text message. Shit.

Uncle Gregory turns towards you, a scowl on his face.

“Of course,” he says. Then the rest of your family depends in a flock of opportunistic malice, rattling off every sin you’ve committed since the last time they ritualistically shat on your character. Half of the accusations are stupid, like ‘he ate the last of the Nutella’, but Uncle Greg treats them with all the seriousness of a murder charge. When at last the kitchen settles, Uncle Greg holds out his hand.

“Give me the phone and go to your room. You’re grounded. Don’t come out.”

You open your mouth to argue, but out of the corner of your eye, you see his fingers twitch. You’ve spent enough time around violent children to know what that little twitch means. Greg is about six feet, and probably weighs three hundred pounds. And you have never been that good at taking a hit.

You hand over the phone and sulk off to your room.
“Hey sweetie.” You mom creeps open the door to your temporary bedroom an indeterminate number of hours later. “Grandma said you weren’t feeling good, and you didn’t want dinner. I figured I’d bring it up to your room incase you get hungry later.”

“Thanks mom,” you say without taking your eyes off the ceiling.

“Do you want me to get you some aspirin or something?”

“No thanks, mom.” She doesn’t respond, but you can feel her hovering in the doorway.

“Uncle Greg told me that you were very rude to Grandma earlier,” she says quietly.

“Lou and Cecil were texting me. Apparently they’re going to New Rome for New Years as part of a camp cultural exchange. Grandma told me to put the phone away, and I told her I was busy.” Reciting the events only makes you more upset, so you curl on your side and tug and blankets around you.

“Oh honey, I’m so sorry.” She comes over and sits on the side of your bed. You don’t move to acknowledge her, but you don’t brush off the hand she runs through your hair either.

“Will we get the car back by tomorrow?” you ask. Your mom’s hand rests against your forehead.

“No,” she says quietly, “it won’t be ready until the day after.” You screw your eyes shut and then laugh. Fucking perfect.

“And no one’s going to be lending me their car anytime soon.” Your mom resumes petting your hair.

“Do you want me to give you my phone so you can call them?” she asks. “Or get the spray bottle. I still have a few drachmas for an Iris Message.” You shake your head.

“I don’t really want to be reminded of how close I was to getting to see them,” you say. Your mom hums, then leans down and kisses your temple

“We’ll go back home as soon as my car is ready,” she says. You sigh and nod. Your head fills with every possible scenario that could feasibly get you from here to New Rome, but somehow you can’t think of a way to get across the bridge aside from swimming.

... New Years Eve finds you alone on the roof, singing your heart out for the birds, all strung out on the telephone poles. All except for one, are big, black, crows, your father’s patron animal. Snuck into the middle of the crows is a little white dove. After a moment, it flutters down onto the roof top. It stares no matter how loud you sing, so when one chorus comes to an end, you point to the dove as if to say this one’s for you. That seems to please the bird, and it hops a little closer.
“My lover’s got humor, he’s the giggle at a funeral.” You watch the orange streetlight, counting as many as you can in the darkness because this close to the city there are no stars. “Knows everybody’s disapproval. Should’ve worshipped him sooner.” You performed in a play once, by Aristophanes, about birds usurping the gods, because they could prevent human prayers and sacrifices from flowing through the sky and up to the heavens. This stretch of suburbia reminds you of that play. Who needs a moon, when you have these pale imitations of suns. Who needs a sun when night is so bright you can’t even see the stars.

You check your watch. It’s nine thirty. It’s too late to do anything, and too early to go to bed. You could scream.

"Every Sunday's getting more bleak, fresh poison each week." Down below, one of the windows slams open. Whips of baby blue drapes flutter out into the murky ambivalence of the suburban night, snatching at the orange flickers of lamp-light.

“Shut the fuck up!” Chadwick calls, and then he swears, boorish and monotonous, as he tries to wrestle the blinds back inside. You sing louder in answer, belting the words with ever fiber of your being. Somewhere along the way the dove has hobbled up to you, and watches, like a judge to your efforts.

“We were born sick, you heard them say it!” Just then you hear some scrambling behind you, and turn to see your mother climbing up the roof. The words of your song die on your lips as you watch her navigate the tile. “What are you doing up here?”

“When I was a girl, this was my hideout spot you know.” She settles down next to you. You nod, but note that she didn’t really answer your question. You know she will, if you give her enough time. After a careful silence she continues. “Cecil and Lou Ellen have been sending me messages for the past hour trying to convince me to let you come to New Rome. Apparently there’s a party tonight,” she says and you hum an acknowledgement of that statement. “Reason number eight was ‘there’s alcohol, and you’re a cool mom.’”

“They’re not drinking are they?” you say with a worried little frown. The doctor in you does not approve of underage drinking.

“I’m supposed to be the cool mom, I’m not going to nark on them.” She laughs lightly. You pretend to be put out, but you know that your mom would tell them off for drinking if they were, so your conscious settles.

“What were some other good reasons?”

“Reason number seventeen was ‘Look at my puppy dog eyes.’”

“Lou or Cecil?” you ask.

“Lou. I have to tell you I nearly caved.” She smiles and bumps your shoulder. “Reason number twenty-two was ‘Nico’, and then a picture of him. He’s pretty cute.” You blush red up to the tips of your ears.

“Nico’s there?” you ask and she nods. You can’t imagine that Nico is enjoying himself at a party, but then again, you doubt he’d go if he didn’t want to be there.

“Yes, actually. Reason number twenty-three was ‘We could totally convince Nico to shadow travel him here and back, he wouldn’t have to drive.’” She laughs, and hope spikes in your heart. “I probably would have said yes, if it weren’t for earlier.” You turn to look over the empty expanse of
roof, cursing every extended family member. Then you hear a light chiming and turn back to your mother. “It’s really a shame. I mean I went through all of that trouble to swipe Greg’s keys. I wasn’t going to just let them do things the easy way.” She dangles the keys in front of you, and your heart nearly stops.

“Mom?” You look to her for a moment, afraid that this is too good to be true.

“If anyone asks, I was reading in my room. I had no idea you were gone. Try to get back before morning. If they figure it out before then I’ll try to stall, but no promises.” She drops the keys into your lap, and your eyes go wide. You tackle-hug her, pressing a messy kiss to her cheek.

“I love you mom!” you shout before scrambling back towards the balcony window.

“Try to remember that you’re sneaking out, would you?” She laughs, and you duck your head, just a teeny bit embarrassed. “Go, go!” She shoos you off the roof, but you really don’t need to be told twice. As soon as you’re back in the house you sneak down to the garage. Most people have retired to their rooms, but there are a few relatives in the living room and kitchen that you have to dodge. Thankfully you are a master of stealth and no one spots you. Or at least if they do spot you, they don’t care enough to stop you.

Uncle Greg’s car is way bigger than it needs to be, but on the bright side, you could easily plow straight through any monster that gets in your way. You check your hair in the mirror, and decide that it looks presentable enough. On the way out you grabbed a jacket, and even if it’s a little ratty, it still looks good. You position your mom’s phone at an acceptable selfie angle, and snap a quick picture. For the caption you put “Guess who’s sneaking out.” You wait for what feels like an hour, before you receive a regular text message that just says ‘okay.’ Frankly you’re a little offended, but you shove that feeling aside.

The drive to Camp Jupiter is completely free of any major life-threatening catastrophe, as long as you’re not counting the fact that three different stations were playing ‘Blurred Lines.’ Well, bad music aside, you make it to camp in a little over half an hour. In the distance you can see two distinct areas, one lit up with the bumbling orange lights of a city, and the other, a looming black mass with occasional lights, spread out over worn and uneven ground. You guess that’s Camp Jupiter. Not as pretty as Camp Halfblood, you’ve gotta say. As you’re crossing the river some weird statue thing pops up out of the ground next to your car.

“I’m here for the party in New Rome, with all the Greeks,” you tell it, because you figure it’s some kind of mythical bouncer.

“Oh,” he says, “the Greeks.” The statue says ‘Greeks’ like one might say ‘roach.’

“Yeah, let me through,” you insist. The statue clicks his tongue at you.

“Why aren’t you with the rest of your party?” he demands.

“Because,” the gears in your brain begin to whirl and hum, “Chiron said I could just come later. I live nearby, so I figured I’d visit family and then swing by here.”

“Ug!” The statue seemed a little too offended by that answer. “I can’t believe you Greeks expect me to just let you in whenever.”

“I mean, the camps are supposed to be somewhat merged now, right? It’s not like it matters,” you say. Seriously, why is this bouncer so uptight?

“Fine! You know what, with all of you Greeks coming we might as well let mortals through too.
Who’s going to stop them? Certainly not me, I’m just letting everyone through!” He huffs and then disappears. You think about possibly asking what the Hades that was about, but decide not to push your luck. Great. Now you’ve got to find the party. Can’t be that hard.

You choose the great big looming shape because that seems like the most likely place to find a bunch of teenage soldiers. After a while you find a parking lot filled with big black sedans and slide your own into the nearest space. You are not going to remember which one was yours, but right now you really don’t care. You have more important things to deal with. The first person you see is a Satyr, and you immediately begin to question him.

“Whoa . . .” He holds up his hands and laughs. “Easy there my friend. The party is over in the barracks. It’s still raging.” You just make a beeline for the building he pointed too without saying another word.

When you push through the door to the barracks you’re not exactly sure what you thought you would see. It’s certainly not the off-white walls and the old blue carpet. Something about the space reminds you of a college dorm, except the hallway is twice as wide and every once in a while there are burn marks or suspicious read splotches. The building is made up of a single long hallway with seemingly random doors thrown here and there. Some are marked with bathroom signs, and others are marked with numbers. They start at one, and move towards five as you wander around. After you make it to three, you find what appears to be some sort of living area, though it’s deserted. There’s a bookshelf on one wall, and a few worn looking tables and chairs, scattered in vague clumps. At the back there’s a little bar with a microwave and a toaster. The place is almost cozy, but you don’t stop to relax.

Lou Ellen spots you first, and you know she does because, as you’re wondering through a seemingly empty hallway, and following the sound of people’s voices, you suddenly hear someone scream, “He’s here!” You turn to the left and find her standing in one of the doorways, slack jawed. “Good to see you too,” you say, wondering why she is in an apparently empty part of the barracks. However, before you get the chance to sass her, Lou Ellen launches herself at you in a full-blown tackle-hug. You only just manage to remain standing.

“WILL! IS! HERE!” She clings to you tighter, shouting out every bit of that sentence in your ear. Your poor, poor ear. After a second she releases you, popping back onto the ground and staring up with big, shining eyes. “We don’t have time to talk, follow me!” She grabs your hand and drags you to the last door on the hallway, marked with a five. Only then do you realize that those numbers were for the Roman equivalent of cabins. You think they were called . . . Consorts? Whatever, you don’t really care right now.

The doorway opens up into a menagerie of rooms that seem more personal. There are other living areas, some with TVs, some with games, and one room that appears to be for storing armor. Clusters of bedrooms branch off here and there. Bathroom doors are left open, and as you pass you can see lines of shower stalls, and bathroom stalls, like a gym.

The faint trace of music you heard in the hallway has morphed into a thumping bass and muddle lyrics. Occasionally you see a person, or a pair of people, wander past in the halls. Lou drags you into a fairly open room, like the living room you saw earlier, though this one is smaller and has a full kitchen. More people are congregated there, and a few look up at you once you’ve entered the room. One very forward boy wearing a scarf gives you a long once over and then smiles like a devil with a deal.
“Okay, we need to find Kyla,” she says, and then she sits down in the nearest chair.

“What a good idea Lou, I'm sure that sitting on your ass is going to be the fastest way to find her,” you gripe. Lou just smiles at you real big, and then bounds up out of the chair to tackle-hug you again.

“Oh my gods, I can’t believe you really came. This is like Christmas!” she mumbles that into your shoulder, and this time, rather than standing there like a surprised log, you hug her back just as hard.

Kyla decides that now would be a really good time to wander through this vaguely unoccupied room. She almost walks past the two of you, but does a startled double take at the last moment. You can see the train of thought filtering across her face. Lou is wrapped around some dude, what the fuck? Oh the dude is Will, okay. OH MY GODS THAT DUDE IS WILL.

“Will!” She squeezes the two of you, though she is much more gentle than her girlfriend. After a few seconds, they both release you, and leave you standing in the relatively awkward silence of the common room. If the Romans weren’t paying you any attention before, they certainly are now. Scarf boy looks a little disappointed, and your ego just got a very significant boost. “Will, I am so glad you came! Come on!” Now it’s Kyla’s turn to take your hand and drag you through more rooms, closer to the loud thumping of party music. You would ask what the fuck was going on, but you’re a little high on the fact that you’re anywhere but that stupid house right now. Kyla pauses for a moment to get her bearings, and hey is that Connor Stoll, when someone’s shrill voice carries above the music.

“What are those?!” In the nearest doorway Drew Tanaka is staring you down like you crawled out of sewer. Her eyes linger on your feet.

“Sandals,” you say, “I'm surprised you've never heard of them.”

She ignores that comment in favor of giving you a scathing once over. “This is not acceptable.” Kyla turns to look at you, her face scrunched up as if in pain.

“Really?” she asks, and Drew just sighs like someone put the world on her shoulders.

“Yes, really. Come.” Kyla lets go of your hand, and you just stare at Drew’s retreating shoulders.

“Okay, what is going on?” You’re more than happy to follow Lou and Kyla around like a lost puppy, but you’re not just going to follow the ex-counselor of Aphrodite around. She's mean and she doesn't appreciate your sandals. However, Drew seems to be running on a tight schedule, so she only looks over her shoulder and says:

“If you want to know, I suggest you catch up.” And well, since you do want to know, you follow her.

“So . . .” you begin as she marches into a bedroom where a young couple are enthusiastically making out.

“Out,” she instructs, and the two quickly jump apart and exit the room. She then turns to you. “I don’t even know where to start,” she says, waving at your clothing. Then she looks right past you at Lou and Kyla. “Grab someone his size,” she instructs.

“What’s wrong with my clothing?” You happen to like your clothing. You’re wearing an old band t-shirt, a pair of old shorts, that ratty jacket, and your usual sandals. Drew just makes a disgusted noise.

“I cannot believe you would wear that to a date,” she sighs again. Well, the little ego boost you got from Scarf Boy crumbles into a million pieces, but also wait . . . What was that last part?
“Date?”

“Strip.”

“At least buy me dinner first,” you mutter. She gives you a look that clearly explains how much she is not fucking around. You take off your clothes as she starts talking.

“Upon receiving your text, Cecil decided that he was going to set you and Nico up tonight to resolve the tension that has been killing the rest of us at camp.” You turn bright red, hands fumbling with your belt buckle. Gods, how could she just say that? “The Aphrodite Cabin deigned to offer our assistance in making things go smoothly.”

“Right,” you say, working up the courage to strip off your shorts. “If that’s true, then shouldn’t Piper be the one making me get naked in a strange dormitory.” Gods you really hope this is not some kind of sick prank.

“I owe you,” she says after a beat, and when you look over at Drew she looks almost human. Her head is tucked to the side, and her shoulders are bunched up in defense. “For the Battle of Manhattan. I know that most people don’t like me, but you saved me anyway.” You sigh, suddenly endeared to this strange, and frankly abrasive, girl.

“You don’t owe me anything. You needed my help, so I gave it.” You want to maybe hug her, but that would be awkward, considering you’re standing around in your boxers. “You’re a human being, you’re worth helping.” Drew looks like she’s about to cry, but at the last moment she shakes it off and looks you right in the eye.

“Well, now you need my help, so I’m giving it to you,” she says firmly. What a charitable soul, you think dryly. There is a quick warning knock at the door, before Mitchell marches in, accompanied by the twins.

“I heard there was a . . .” Mitchell stops for a second, looking you up and down appraisingly. “Well, hello.” You blush bright red again. Seriously, do Aphrodite kids have no shame?

“Oh good, you brought two,” Drew says, brushing right past Mitchell to inspect the twins.


“Why is Will practically naked?” Jamie-Lyn asks.

“Because he has bad taste, and I’m going to fix it. He needs to borrow your clothes,” Drew says. The twins look at each other and instantly brighten.

“For his date?” they ask, simultaneously and Drew nods, “Okay!”

Then there starts a chatter you are not competent enough to fully understand.

“Okay, give him your jeans.”

“The Prada belt definitely.”

“But what about his shirt?” There’s some more babble while they argue about how much of your body should be exposed (“Nico sees him in shorts and a t-shirt all the time, we have to cover up” “But if he’s too fancy, it’ll be weird” “Look, a button up will show off his collarbones”) and at some point Jamie-Lyn hands you a pair of oxfords and says, “These are Alexander Wang. Try not to get
them dirty.” You’re not entirely sure who Alexander Wang is, but he sounds famous.

There’s some talk about what the twins can pull off that you can’t.

“They have the bone structure for it, but Will’s a little less posh looking,” Drew says at one point. You’re pretty sure that ‘posh’ isn’t a real word.

“See the greaser look is good on boys with dark hair, but Will’s a true blond. Which reminds me—” and then Mitchell’s gone off to do something.

Eventually what Drew settles on is something she likes to call the ‘sexy rock star’ look. You’ve got on a plain white t-shirt, a brown leather jacket that is just distressed enough to look crazy expensive, designer jeans, a simple necklace with a little gold disk attached, and a plaid shirt tied around your hips. It takes you three tries to roll up the cuffs of the jeans ‘correctly’.

Mitchell returns at last with some hair jell and fusses with your hair until the messy half-curls are neat and bouncy, and parted a little off to one side. Lou and Kyla come back in once you’ve been sufficiently made up and whistle appreciatively.

“I am wearing so much clothing,” you say.

“Stop your wining,” Lou says sweetly, “you have karaoke to sing.”

“Win Nico’s heart!” The twins say in unison again, and you know that must mean that they’re absolutely buzzing with excitement. You don’t think you’ve ever heard them say so many things in unison before.

“They’ve already got the ‘new beau’ set list planned out,” Kyla says and well that can’t be good. Still there’s no way it could be worse than when Lou and Kyla started dating, and every time they were together your family burst out into Katie Perry’s ‘I Kissed a Girl.’ In your defense, it was mostly hilarious because Kyla had sworn up and down that she was heterosexual until she fell head over heels for Lou. “They found out that Nico’s from Italy recently.” You groan.

“Is he gay?” Jamie-Lyn sings.

“Or European?” Devereux finishes with a flourish.

“No Legally Blond!” you insist, but they ignore you. Even having to wear your ‘ugly shorts’ and ‘ratty shirt’ doesn’t seem to dampen their theatrical spirits. “We’re leaving,” you say, pushing through the door. Just as you’re about to leave, you hear Drew call to you faintly.

“Good luck.” You stop dead in your tracks and turn around, a wide smile on your face.

“Come again?” you say.

“I said, don’t fuck it up.” She crosses her arms and looks off to the side, a little bit of pink on her cheeks. You nearly laugh, amazed once again by the human capacity to change, and yet not change at all. You make your way into the party practically skipping. There’s something in your bones that tells you tonight is the night. You’re not sure why, exactly, and logically you know that if you and Nico got together now, you’d have to wait until Spring Break to see him again, but it feels . . . right. This is right. You know it.

Cecil is waiting for you at the door of a jam-packed room. There’s a little raised platform at the back, and onstage someone is singing “Since You Been Gone” by Kelly Clarkson. Judging by her passion, you assume that the girl is either a Roman child of Apollo or that she had a really bad breakup
recently.

“Was karaoke seriously the best plan you could come up with?” you ask as you watch the press of people cheer. Most everyone is singing along with her, and there’s even a group that’s jumping up and down and dancing along. You can’t say that karaoke isn’t fun, but it’s not exactly a solid plan as far as winning someone’s heart is concerned.

“You gave us thirty minutes to think of something, cut me some slack,” Cecil says, but he wraps you in a hug before socking you on the shoulder. “Plus I spent like fifteen of those minutes just saying ‘Holy shit he’s actually coming’ over and over again.”

“I missed you guys,” you mumble and try to hug Cecil again, but he puts a hand on your shoulder.

“We missed you too buddy, obviously. But right now you have to win that boy’s heart!” Cecil nods and looks at the line of people wrapped around the side of the room. At the front, they’re writing their name and their song in a little book so the DJ knows what to play next. “Okay that line is too long, I’m just going to steal the book.”

“Sounds like a plan,” you say, “but first I’m going to pee.” Cecil groans, but you wave him off. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

.

You are a horrible, horrible liar.

You are not back in a minute. You aren’t even back in thirty minutes. You make it to the bathroom all right, but once you come out you are totally lost. At one point you walk into a room where Austin is doing slam poetry. You think he must be doing well because people keep snapping. When he sees you, he takes a break, hugs you hard enough to break bones, and then gives you a poetic lecture to the tune of Shakespeare.

“If thou dost seek to have what thou dost hide, by self-example mayst thou be denied,” he says. You take this to mean ‘confess, or you’ll be stuck with this hellish tension forever.’ You nod, and he says a few more lines of poetry before slapping you on the back and saying, “may you slip briskly into an intimacy from which you may never recover.”

You leave before he can quote more Fitzgerald at you.

After a while, you wander into a near-empty room, the thudding bass a distant memory. The Roman Praetor, Reyna, is just sitting in one of the chairs sipping tea, and you feel like you’ve officially fallen down the rabbit hole. Her dress is the same shiny purple material as her magic cape, and oh. Wait maybe it is the cape. Maybe it can do that.

“Oh, Will Solace. You are just the man I was looking for.” She sets her teacup down on a little matching saucer and motions for you to take a seat across from her.

“I am?” you ask, sitting on the edge of your assigned, and wow, you really want to run away.

“I heard that you were coming. You caused quite the commotion,” she says simply, folding her hands in her lap.

“Oh yea. My friends can get a little crazy. Family too. They always get really excited when someone’s uh . . . When someone’s going to ask out their crush.” You swallow, heat spreading across your face. This is so awkward, why is this happening to you.
“So it’s true. You’re going to confess your feeling for Nico,” she says and nods, like that’s good news. Tension shoots up your spine. Any minute now you’re convinced that she’s going to interrogate you, or demand you stop pursuing him, or any number of aggressive over-protective sibling things.

“Yep,” you squeak out. She nods again, and shifts a little bit in her chair.

“If you don’t mind my asking, how do you plan doing it?”

“Um, karaoke.”

“Oh. I see. What song?”

“Um, I’m actually not sure yet. I was thinking ‘Accidentally In Love,’ but it might be coming on a bit strong. I don’t know.”

“I don’t think I’m familiar with that song.”

“It’s a good, you should look it up. It’s by Smash Mouth,” you say. You wonder why this awkward stilted conversation happens every time the two of your interact. It’s like being left alone with your friend’s parent. You wish she would just get things over with.

Suddenly Reyna stands and sticks out her hand.

“Well, I wish you luck.” You stand up and take the offered hand. Her handshake is firm, but not crushing.

“Is that it?” you ask. Reyna look faintly amused.

“You expected me to give you the third degree?” she asks.

“Kind of yeah,” you laugh, rubbing the back of your head.

“I know that perhaps I did not give you the best impression of me last time we met, but I don’t mean you any harm. I want Nico to be happy. He doesn’t trust easily. He only came to trust me because my mother’s gift is Empathy, and I quite literally would share in his pain. But you . . . He simply trusts you. When prompted, he will speak of your kindness. I want to believe that you will be good for him.” She doesn’t quite smile, but the fondness is something you’ve seen countless times on your own family’s face. You’re suddenly struck by an affection for her that you never thought possible. You’re glad that Nico has someone like this in his life.

“Geez, I think I’d feel less pressure if you had just threatened me.” You laugh. Reyna smiles.

“I can still threaten you if you would like,” she says.

“No, no thank you.” You take a sizeable step away from her. “Do you have the time, by the way?”

“It’s eleven forty-seven,” she answers with a prompt glance at her watch. Your teacher’s words echo in your head ‘If you have something to say to someone, I suggest you say it before the New Year.’

“I should get going,” you say and Reyna waves you off. “Um, do you happen to know how to get to the room they’re doing karaoke in? I’m actually kind of lost.” Reyna look like she regrets giving you her blessing, but she gives you directions anyway.

...
Just outside the karaoke room, someone catches your eye. It’s the mass of curly golden hair springing from a petite black girl that first draws your attention, but right next to the girl is your one and only. A moment after you deduce that the girl is probably Hazel, she disappears, and leaves Nico leaning against the wall. You can’t help yourself.

“Hey, wallflower,” you say, sliding in next to him. Nico looks up, lips parting around a noise of surprise that is too soft to be heard over the rattling din around the two of you.

“I thought you weren’t coming?” he says. His eyes flicker over you, snagging here and there on your clothing. You smile, marginally thankful that the Aphrodite cabin jumped you.

“A little birdy told me that the Ghost King was hanging around at this party, and I just had to come see for myself.” You knock his shoulder gently. Nico scoffs and shrugs.

“I figured it’d be a good way to visit Hazel and Reyna,” he says, and then he gives you a mock glare. “Actually, it’s the only way I can visit Hazel and Reyna since someone told Chiron that I shouldn’t be allowed to cross-country shadow travel.”

“I wouldn’t have told him if someone would just stop using their Underworld powers for a few months. I swear, you’re like an athlete who keeps playing on a bad knee.” You shake your head and Nico rolls his eyes but the banter is familiar and warms you heart a little.

“WILLIAM SO-oh there he is.” The little crowd around the doorway stills and then awkwardly shuffles away to reveal Lou Ellen. “Oh, and Nico. Hiya!” She gives him a happy little wave. She seems surprised to see Nico here, and you wonder if your friends had thought of how they were going to actually get Nico to go to karaoke or if they simply hadn’t thought that far ahead. However, Lou turns to you with a sour glare, and those wandering thoughts flee from your head. “William Solace, you sure have a skewed perception of what constitutes a minute. I was half a second away from hunting you down and dragging you back by your ear. Now get your butt in here.”

“I’m sorry. Please don’t turn me into a newt. I’m coming.” You pretend to cower, but can’t stop a smile from slipping across your lips. Lou makes a show of rolling her eyes before spinning around and marching back into the room. You look over your shoulder at Nico. “You coming?” Nico frowns.

“Karaoke’s not really my thing,” he says.


“Well I don’t have anything better to do. Hold on a second.” He looks off into the crowd, cupping his hands around his mouth, and shouting “Hazel!” From the press of people you see a cloud of golden curls pop up. She’s standing next to this great big Asian dude, who you recognize as one of the other seven. Nico points to himself, and then to you. Her eyes slide over to you and she stares blankly for a moment, before recognition flickers across her eyes. Then she’s smiling brightly and waving Nico off. “Alright, let’s go.” You leave your bubble of relative safety on the wall and move into the throng of people.

“That was your sister?” you shout over the dull roar of the party as you try to wiggle into the karaoke room. Nico almost gets separated from you, but you reach out and grab his hand. His fingers lock around yours in a death grip as you pull him through the crowd, but your chest still feels a little fuzzy when you think about the fact that he is actually holding your hand.
“Yeah, that’s Hazel. The big guy was her boyfriend Frank,” Nico says.


“You have no idea.” You can’t help but smile.

“You know seeing Hazel in person made me wonder, is being short a Hades thing?” you ask. Nico kicks your ankle. “Ow!”

“I’m not even fifteen yet, I’m still growing.” Nico gives you a fierce scowl. You just smile and make your way over to a fairly open spot of wall with a clear view of the stage.

“Any requests?” you ask, dropping Nico’s hand. He looks at all of the people around you.

“Try not to pick anything too embarrassing,” he says.

“Well now I definitely have to sing something embarrassing.” You smile, and Nico scowls at you. You slip away, spotting Kyla’s head bobbing in the crowd.

“There you are!” She puts her hands on her hips and glares at you like you had kept her waiting for ages.

“I got distracted,” you say. Lou Ellen snorts a laugh.

“I’ll say,” she mutters under her breath.

“Anyway!” you say, before any jokes about your stupidly obvious crush can be made. “I know what I’m going to sing.” You take the book from Cecil’s hands. He looks a bit incredulous as you scribble something in the blank space, but when he catches sight of the title, a wide smile splits his face.

“Oh, dude,” he snickers and passes it to the girls to see. Kyla’s eyes go wide, while Lou joins Cecil in his snickering.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Kyla asks, then she quickly hands the book off to the resident DJ. He looks at it and sighs. When the song on stage ends (Beyoncé’s “Count Down,” always a good choice), he leans into the microphone.

“Next up, we have Will Solace singing . . . ‘Just the Girl’ . . . Boy? Okay, ‘Just the Boy’ by The Click Five.” Well the DJ might not be too excited, but the rest of the crowd is.

All in all things go pretty well. You’re more of a performer than an artist when it comes to singing, which is perfect for karaoke. You try to make eye contact with Nico as a way to show him that you were serious about the whole ‘I’m singing for you’ thing, but you can’t really find him. You face the part of the room where you left him and simply hope for the best.

At then end you give a flourished bow to a big round of applause and then hop off the stage. You spot Kyla first, and she aggressively points over towards the wall and then gives you a thumps up. You move in the direction of her frantic gestures, and find Nico watching the floor.

“Hey!” you call, sliding up next to him, “how’d I do?” Nico’s a little red, but he swallows and folds his arms over his chest.

“I’ve never heard of the song, but it was pretty good I guess.”

“Never heard of the it?!” You slap a hand over your chest.
“Is this going to be like the Princess Bride thing?” he asks with a roll of his eyes. You’re about to answer yes, just to ruffle his feathers, when someone runs into you. You nearly crash into Nico, but you catch yourself at the last moment on the wall behind him.

“Do you want to go somewhere a little less crowded?” you ask, looking over you shoulder. A little thread of annoyance curls your fist into a tight knot. No one apologizes, and you can’t tell who it was. Nico looks up at you, his lips pursed firmly shut, and nods. “Okay, hold on.” You take his hand, pulling him along through the press of people. His hand isn’t gripping yours as tightly this time, and every once and a while he squeezes your fingers as a silent way to say ‘slow down’ or ‘wait a second.’ You can feel your heart beating out of your chest by the time you settle down in a place with a little bit of breathing room.

You’re so distracted by the rush of blood in your ears, and the suddenly sickening nerves that rattle your body, that you don’t even notice what’s happening around you. People seem to be winding up for something, moving together in little groups towards the next room over, but all you see is Nico, his face a little flushed, and his eyes wide and bright.

“Were you serious about singing for me?” Nico asks, and you nod, all of your words and thoughts stuck up in your chest. “Why?” Just as you open your mouth, everyone in the next room over begins to shout.

“TEN!” It startles you enough that you lose the next second.

“NINE!” Your teacher’s words pulse through your brain as your heart beats a little faster, before the New Year.

“EIGHT!”

“Nico I-”

“SEVEN!” Your words get lost in the crowd.

“What?” He stares at you blankly, a little frown of confusion tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“SIX!”

“I said-”

“FIVE!”

“That I-”

“FOUR!”

“What?” He demands again.

“THREE!” You pull him close enough that you can speak into his ear.

“TWO!” His dark curls brush against your cheek, and you can feel his hand, still in yours, gods still in yours, squeeze you a little tighter.

“Nico, I like-”

“ONE!”

The final word is on the tip of your tongue, but the world moves on into the New Year with a
muddled mix of shouts and cheers and in the rush your ghost of a chance gets left behind.

Something yanks the back of your shirt and for a moment your battle instincts tell you it’s a monster.

“There you are.” The moment it begins to speak, you know it’s a monster.

“Chadwick, how the fuck did you get in here?” You yank yourself out of his grip, and spin around to glare at him. Nico’s hand tumbles out of yours. “How the fuck did you even know I was here?”

“Will . . . ?” Nico asks carefully, eyeing Chadwick with the kind of frightening intensity that tells you he’s about half a second away from stabbing the bastard. The demigods nearest to you turn your way, shoulders hunching up. You understand why, Chadwick’s voice has all the comfort of nails on a chalkboard.

“It’s just my cousin Chadwick, he’s an asshole, but he’s fairly benign,” you say, remembering the punch to your shoulder and forcing a smile. You still hate Chadwick, but you’ve never hated anyone enough to leave them unwittingly at the mercy of a bunch of pissed off, slightly intoxicated demigods.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You know you’re in so much trouble-” He keeps talking, railing on you like the disapproval of your mother’s family is some terrible curse. The happy high you had been coasting on slowly drains out of you, leaving your limbs tight and heavy.

“Yes, yes. I’m an affront to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Look, I’ll meet you in the car, and you can yell at me there,” you say, “I just have to say goodbye first.” Chadwick crosses his arms over his chest, huffs something about your being a ‘stupid kid at a college party’ and marches out of the room. You’re somewhat thankful for the Mist. You’re too tired to make up a story about why you’re hanging out in a barracks.

“He’s a mortal right? How did he get in here?” Nico asks, and you smile somewhat sheepishly.

“I uh . . . I might have pissed off the supernatural bouncer at the bridge to the point that he may or may not have quit his job.” You shove your hands in the too-tight pockets of your borrowed designer jeans, heat burning up your neck. “But it was totally an accident!” Suddenly you feel so stupid, all dressed up like this.

Then Nico laughs, loud and full.

"Only you, Solace." He runs a hand through his hair and shakes his head. Then the smile slowly drops off his face, and he gives you a very serious and studying look. “You don’t have to go,” he says.

For one, glorious moment, you almost say yes. But then your conscious pricks at you. You want so badly to stay, but you can practically feel Chadwick’s presence at your back, and you know he won’t leave without you. You could leave him out there all night, but Chadwick has a big mouth and no sense of self-preservation.

“No, I should go,” you say, sighing and running a hand through your hair. Your heart aches. This is shitty; this is all so unbelievably shitty. You turn to go, but Nico catches your wrist.

“Wait. What were you trying to say earlier, during the countdown? I couldn’t hear you,” he asks, though he looks a little shy about it. You soften for a moment, and open your mouth to tell him. A few more stolen moment’s can’t hurt, and you wanted so badly for tonight to be the night.

A strange thing happens.
It’s like a shutter closes in your mind, shutting out the words you wanted to say. In their place a heavy and squirming feeling settles on your tongue, dripping down into the pits of your stomach. Anxiety, you realize after a moment, and the feeling is so strange that you don’t know what to do with it. Well what can you do with it, but give in?

“It was nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Next time you’ll find a way around it.

“Are you sure?” Nico asks.

No, You think.

“I . . . Yeah. I’ll tell you about it next time,” you say with a tense smile. Nico nods, and then waves you off.

“See you, Sunshine,” he says and then he disappears into the crowd, a single shadow among many.

Your mom drives you home the next day, and all the roads look familiar, but something about it unsettles you. If you had to put it into words, you would say that the world seems to have shifted slightly to the left.

The car radio plays the same six tunes over and over again. It feels like every station plays the same six tunes. You turn it off halfway through the drive and your mother says nothing.

There’s a nervous buzzing underneath your skin, but you figure that it’s just leftover nerves from the colossal disaster that last night was. You figure it will fade.

Chapter End Notes

Did The Click Five even have songs aside from that one. I feel like they are one of those bands who had one hit and then were just gone. They faded off into the ambivalent space of shitty late 2000s pop music.

Anyway Austin’s words were brought to you by:

Shakespeare’s Sonnets (I don’t remember which sonnet, I just put Shakespeare down in my notes.)

F. Scott Fitzgerald, the original quote is “they slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they never recovered” and it comes from the novel This Side of Paradise, but like Eliot, I think that just about everything Fitzgerald writes is poetry.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

I'm baaaaaack. Two months late, but at least I'm back. Anyway, please enjoy "Will Has a Shitty Year Pt. 2"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The nervous buzzing under your skin hasn’t dissipated by the time school starts up again, but you’ve started to get used to it. It’s amazing what things a person can get used to.

Ms. M is different too. She’s less . . . soft. If you didn’t know better, you’d say she was a totally different person. You start to read the *Iliad* in class, but your heart’s not in it. There are a hundred and one jokes to be made about all of these stupid heroes and gods but they all fall flat in your mind.

“If Achilles had faced his prophecy and fought Hector right off the bat, Patroclus wouldn’t have had to die. Heroes always run into worse fates by trying to run away from their prophecies,” you say, sighing into the pages. “They should just accept it.” Ms. M pauses and turns to you.

“You think it’s so easy, but have you ever faced fate like that?” she asks. You open your mouth to give some sort of snooty reply but it dies on your tongue and you look back out the window. She’s got a point. You’ve never had to face a prophesy before. All you do is sit in the infirmary at camp, while everyone else fights your battles.

Outside the sky is a brilliant blue. You think that it must be nice outside, but you know from this morning’s experience that it’s actually pretty cold. You hate days like this, where everything pretends that it’s nice. The dove is back, patiently sitting and staring at you from the windowsill. You’re thinking of naming the bird, but nothing comes to mind.

Ms. M catches your gaze. She moves to the window, and opens it.

“Leave,” she says. The dove tilts it’s head to the side just a fraction, before flapping off. You look around to the rest of the students, to see if they noticed it, but everyone has their nose buried in their text.

. . .

Spring break comes and the camp is quite. Overhead the skies are stretched with a thin layer of dusty grey clouds. It’s funny; you don’t think you’ve ever seen the sky overcast. It has rained before, but that was only when the magic surrounding camp had faltered. You don’t think the camp magic is faltering. The campers in the coliseum aren’t panicked, or all that tense. There’s no one in the infirmary, except a few kids with colds.

No one is in your cabin when you arrive, so you have plenty of time to unpack. You wonder where
they are . . . Probably arts and crafts. That happens about this time during break. At least you think it does. It’s weird you can’t really remember.

Something seems off about your cabin, but you’re not quite sure what it is.

Ah well. People will be back soon enough. You’ll have to remember to ask them then.

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You run into Nico on your third day of break. You’re about to ask him where he’s been when you notice that he’s got a SPQTR shirt on underneath his jacket. You guess that chilling at Camp Jupiter is more fun during the winter.

He waves at you when you’re on the way back from checking out the infirmary.

You wave back.

You walk together back towards the cabins. When you pass by his, you part ways.

Nothing strikes you as strange about the encounter, until you’re back in your cabin. Then you realize that neither of you said a word the whole way. It’s quiet in your cabin, but dinner is happening in an hour. You’ll see everyone then, no need to go running around.

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“Does camp seem strange to you?” you ask Cecil. He pauses and looks at you.

“Strange? Strange how?” you shrug your shoulders.

“I don’t know . . . just strange,” you say. Cecil looks down at his hands and then shrugs. He turns his head away from you.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say,” Cecil says. “I haven’t noticed anything.”

“You’re not supposed to. . . Never mind.” You fiddle with the laces on your shoes. The plastic end has come off of one of the laces. You can’t remember what that thing is called. “It was a stupid question. See any cool monsters lately?”

Cecil turns to you, and he looks pained.

“No,” he says. You want to ask if he’s okay, but he gets up and makes a b-line for the Big House. You guess he has something important to do. It’d be best not to bother him.

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On the fifth day of break, you realize that you haven’t seen Mr. D once. You saw Chiron for a moment, sitting on the porch of the Big House, but you haven’t seen Mr. D. You wonder if he’s up on Olympus right now.

...  

You see Nico in the coliseum, turning wooden dummies into sawdust. At one point he hits a dummy so hard that the pole holding it up splinters, and it lists sideways before toppling to the ground. You remember that you were going to tell him you liked him during the New Year's party. A heavy ball of anxiety settles on your tongue again, and you turn away. He’s busy right now. You’ll tell him later.

“Will! Wait up!” You turn to see Nico running through the mucky spring slush of the training grounds. Despite the fact that he’s drenched in sweat, he doesn’t seem bothered by the cold. Still, he’ll get a cold that way. “I haven’t seen you around much.” He says.

You shrug. Nico watches you carefully for a moment.

“What are you headed?” he asks. You think for a moment. You weren’t really headed anywhere. Lou Ellen has been busy all week with some unspecified task for Chiron. Cecil is . . . strange. Tense and snappish. You wonder if it’s what Kyla said about Chiron not letting anyone out of camp for a while. Weird monster attacks or something. It’s not news in camp, but Cecil gets antsy whenever he can’t go out. Austin and Kyla are around, but they’ve been pretty focused on their studies recently. They started to look through a lot of your old medical textbooks. Well it figures. You’ve only got two summers at camp left before you go to college. It’s probably good that they’re taking up some more responsibility.

“Will?” Nico asks, snapping his fingers in front of your face. Oh right. Nico. How could you forget?

“Oh um . . . nowhere, I guess.” You look up at the sky and think that you can see a sliver of blue for a moment, but it passes.

“I’m headed back to the cabins. I’ll probably get sick if I walk around like this, right?” He smiles a little, and you nod.

“Yeah,” you say. He will get sick. Nico’s smile falters.

“You know what, why don’t we take a walk instead? I mean, since you’re not going anywhere.” He seems nervous to you, and you can’t quite figure out why. You thought you were past the nervousness.

“Sure,” you say. You begin walking through the camp, across the mushy earth. You think that spring is somehow worse than winter. At least during winter the earth is solid. Now the snow is all slowly starting to melt and everything has turned into a gross, brown sludge.

“Have you noticed anything off about camp?” Nico asks you, and that’s enough to give you pause. You’re just passing the Big House, with its great big porch and dark windows. Wait . . . the Big House doesn’t usually have dark windows does it? Hm, you can’t remember. Oh well.

What were you doing? Oh right, Nico was looking for an answer.
“Yeah, actually. I haven’t been able put my finger on it though,” you say. Nico looks at you expectantly, like he’s waiting for something. What is it? You wonder. You can’t imagine what he wants you to say. He’s standing there quietly, but you can see every second grating against him, like your lack of a real answer to his question is driving him up a wall. Finally he decides to speak up.

“Listen, Will- ” But he doesn’t get to say anything else.

“Nico!” Chiron wheels himself out onto the Big House porch, face pinched in a frown. It’s the closest to ‘furious’ that you’ve ever seen Chiron, and the look makes you take a step back. “May I speak with you a moment.” You wonder what Nico did to get Chiron that mad.

Nico doesn’t move immediately. Instead he just stares back at Chiron, matching his teacher’s muted anger with a look of unbridled contempt. The corner of his lip is lifted up in a mean sneer. You almost take a step back as the silent exchange charges the air.

“Now,” Chiron says.


“Will was just about to ask me a question,” Nico says. You blink back at Nico.

“Don’t put words in his mouth.” Chiron stands from his chair. He looms far above Nico, but the difference only seems to steel Nico’s resolve.

“I’m not,” Nico insists.

“Um, I’m not sure what’s going on, but is there some way I can help?” This confrontation unnerves you. You’re more afraid of letting this reach a boiling point then you are of . . . Well you hadn’t really realized that you were afraid to say something. It’s funny, that’s never really happened to you before. You try for a smile, steeling yourself against the nervous buzzing under your skin.

“Come on, I’m a doctor. Fixing things is what I do!” You try to be as bright and welcoming as you can, but it doesn’t work. Your words seem to take the wind out of both their sails. Chiron sits back down in his wheelchair, and Nico’s shoulders slump. Nico doesn’t look at you.

“I hope your studies are going well, William,” Chiron says, turning to you. That strikes you as a strange thing to say. It’s strange enough that the urge to play with light passes.

“I apologize for letting my frustrations get the best of me,” Chiron replies in kind. Nico shuffles past him into the Big House, hands shoved into the pocket of his jeans. Chiron continues to wait in silence, staring after him, until he flips a hallway light on. Even in the middle of the day, the hallway light leaks out onto the porch. Its faint yellow glow reaches out into the grey dusty air, sliding across the faded blue slats of the back porch, as if searching for something. It reminds you of something, but you’re not sure what. For a moment, you want to reach out to it too, to draw the light towards your fingers.

“I hope your studies are going well, William,” Chiron says, turning to you. That strikes you as a strange thing to say. It’s strange enough that the urge to play with light passes.

“They’re going fine,” you say. He nods.

“Good, good.” Then he shuffles back into the Big House as well, and you’re left feeling like a child, watching the adults talk about something you don’t understand.
The night before your six AM flight back home, you wander into your cabin and find Austin falling apart at the seams. He’s pacing back and forth, muttering to himself and looking around as if he lost something.

“Austin?” you venture. He jumps a mile and then turns to look at you.

“Will…” His eyes widen and then he just nods very slowly.

“Austin, are you alright?” you ask. Austin pauses carefully, as if choosing his words. How funny, words always came so quickly to him.

“I had a dream,” he says. You wait for him to say more, but he doesn’t.

“What was the dream about?” you ask. Austin turns, reaches under his bed, and pulls out a battered old book. Its pages were once gilded, but now all the gold has worn off. The spine is broken, fractured again and again from all the times it has been opened. He finds the page he’s looing for with no trouble at all.

“Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve’s—”

“Austin…” You cut off his reading as an edge of panic slithers down your spine. “Austin, that’s Keats’ Hyperion.”

Austin nods his head and looks down at the book.

“You could recite the whole thing in your sleep, why are you reading it from the book?” you ask. Austin lets the battered old thing clatter to the floor. He sits down on the edge of his bed and puts his head in his hands.

“Because I can’t remember. It’s like all the words have gone out of me. I’ve lost them.” He speaks firmly here.

And then quietly, he adds: “Someone stole them.”

You stand in the middle of the room, as mute as he is, unable to say anything, unable to think of a way to comfort him.

“And what was that line?” he asks, “There’s one about the Naiad, shushing everybody. That’s my favorite line. It’s something about her pressing her finger to her lips.” He reaches forward, and picks the book up again.

“I’m sure it’s only a temporary thing,” you say. Austin doesn’t seem to be listening.

“…The Naiad ‘mid her reed
Pressed her cold finger closer to her lips,” he says. He stares blankly at the pages.

“So you had a dream about the poem?” You ask, and Austin shakes his head.
“I dreamed I was in the poem, but not this one. The other Hyperion, the second draft, the second dream, whatever. The one where he calls the old goddess Moneta instead of Mnemosyne. We were having a fight, like in the book, where she and Keats are arguing about his ‘dreamer tribe’ and they keep misunderstanding each other. Except I was Keats. And we weren’t just saying lines of the poem, we were really talking about something. She was trying to tell me something super important, but I can’t remember what we were talking about . . . All I remember is that we were talking about someone.” Austin shakes his head and then flops back onto his bed.

You think the faint words “dreamer tribe” leave his lips, but you’re not sure.

You stand there for a moment, the names Moneta and Mnemosyne catching in your mind but you’re not quite sure why. You shake it off.

“Well Dad’s still silent up in Olympus, so it couldn’t have been a prophetic dream,” you say.

“It felt like a prophetic dream,” he says, but he rolls over onto his side and grabs his pillow. You recognize this as his position of defeat. After all, he knows as well as you do that there’re no other gods who can give prophecies.

. . .

You leave camp the next morning before anyone is really awake. As your plane takes off for LAX you remember that you didn’t tell Nico that you liked him. Next time, you think, watching New York disappear bellow.

. . .

The downhill slide through AP exams and SATs and finals is enough to keep you preoccupied for the rest of the year. In fact, by the time that summer rolls around you had forgotten all about the weirdness at camp during Spring Break . . . Alright, that’s a lie, but like the incessant buzzing underneath your skin, Spring Break has been pushed to the back of your mind as well. Besides summer will be different.

The last day comes as a breath of fresh air.

“Goodbye, Ms. M. I’ll see you next year.” You wave to your strange teacher, still clad head to toe in a black veil.

“Unfortunately not,” she says quietly, and if you could see her face, you’d bet that she had a sad smile.

“Why? Aren’t you teaching Senior English?” you ask, and she shakes her head.

“I’ll be taking time off in the future to deal with . . . Personal issues. I fear I won’t be coming back.” Something about the way she says that sends a shiver down your back.

“Does this have to do with the whole . . .” You wave at her. “Who you are thing? The whole not
human thing?”

“Yes,” she says.

“Is there anything I can do?” you ask. You’re not good at a lot of things, but you’re pretty good at talking people out of doing stupid things. If she’s in trouble with demigods you could definitely help. Ms. M takes a long time to respond.

“I don’t know,” she says sadly, “but I hope so.”

Then, her whole demeanor changes. She pops up out of her desk and offers a hand for you to shake. “Be careful this summer Fitzwilliam.”

You almost laugh at the teasing lit of her voice. It’s like she’s switched, back to the Ms. M you had at the beginning of the year.

“Who are you?” you ask with a smile, as you shake her hand. Ms. M sighs.

“I can’t tell you my name. That’s something you’ll have to figure out on your own,” she says, and you nod.

“Okay,” you say. “I’ll figure it out, and when I do, you can expect an Iris message. I’ll rub it in your face.” Ms. M laughs lightly, and the sound reminds you of your mother.

“You had been so quiet this past semester, I was worried,” she says.

“I was?” It’s funny, you hadn’t really noticed. Ms. M nods.

“It’s not your fault, I was different too.” Then Ms. M shoos you out the door. “I was serious about what I said. Be careful this summer.” You wave her off.

“I’m always careful,” you say. Ms. M laughs again, but the sound is strangely sad. It echoes around the empty hallways, mingling with the left-behind papers, and pencils, and the other detritus of children long gone.


There are not one, not two, but three crying babies on your plane to New York. There goes any hope you had of quietly catching a few hours of sleep. Things only get worse when you get off the plane. The hundred-eyed-not-murderer isn’t there to pick you up at the airport, which is kind of weird. You called ahead, and left a message on the Big House phone. After twenty minutes of waiting around, you give up and call a taxi. The taxi driver then asks you a million questions about the supposed strawberry farm that you’re working on during the summer, and why you came all the way from LA to work there.

By the time he pulls up at the base of the hill you have a roaring headache, and decide that a trip to the infirmary before you greet your family will do you a lot of good. There’s no one inside, which isn’t too strange for the first day of camp. You drop your stuff off by your desk and go hunting for where the regular mortal medicines are kept. Actually, if you remember correctly, there should be a bottle of ibuprofen in your desk drawer. . .
You were right! You’ve never been so glad to see a pair of little red pills in your life. Now to get some water. Just as you move to get at the little sink the back of the infirmary, the door crashes opening. People flood into the room, screaming things, carrying a body between them. Something like this should surprise you, but then again, this is Camp Half-Blood.

You drop your pills, and immediately start thinking like a doctor.

“Set them over here,” you tell the little group cradling a body. It takes five people to do the job, as the person in their arms thrashes. They put him down on the operating table, and you immediately begin to strap him in.

“Will,” someone breathes, and you barely have time to realize that it’s Austin before you’re moving to inspect the body.

“Did you send someone to get Kyla?” you ask, because you know that Austin’s a good nurse, but he always works better when there’s someone by his side. He nods. “Good. You,” you point to the nearest person and . . . Malcolm? He’s soaked in sweat and wearing combat armor. What the hell was he-

You don’t have time for this line of thinking.

“There’s nectar and ambrosia in the back cabinet, it has a red ribbon on the handle.” He runs for it without question.

“Austin, tell me what happened. The rest of you, get out. You’re in the way.” They scramble. You don’t even have time to register their faces, and Austin starts to explain. You carefully examine the body and . . . it’s one of the minor gods’ kids. You remember his face, the creepy shadow one . . . Landon, son of Erebus.

He’s gasping, eyes wide and flickering like they would in the middle of a dream. His lips are ashy pale, and while it looks like he’s groaning in pain, no sound comes out.

“He went off on his own, something about the shadows not being right.”

“Alone?” you ask. That’s the worst case scenario. You’ve never seen anything like this; he could have run into any number of magical things.

“Well, he went with Pollux, but we can’t find Pollux.” Austin is shaking from his head to his toes.

“Okay,” you say. The edge of his shirt is bloody, so you lift it up. There’s a pair of holes in his side, and around them the skin is purple and pulsing. It looks like some kind of huge snake or spider bite, but with holes that big there should be blood or . . . Some sort of viscous black liquid slithers from one of the holes.

“Get me all of our anti-venom. Malcolm, nectar.” Austin nods and Malcolm passes you the bottle. “Get me a clean rag.” You start by gently pouring some of the nectar over the wound and singing a hymn under your breath. Landon’s whole body goes rigid and the ashen color fades from his lips. The bite starts to fizz and bubble, like the skin is dissolving where the nectar touches it. Landon tries to sit up but the restraints keep him down. The same black liquid that leaked from the hole in his side bubbles to his lips and dribbles out his mouth.

“What the fuck are you doing to him?” Malcolm asks, and you turn to him, grabbing the rag from his hands. You don’t have time to deal with this.

“Get out,” you say, and Malcolm looks at you like you’re crazy, but he leaves. Austin returns with
the anti-venom kits. You pad off Landon’s midsection with the cloth, and note that it does look much worse. The skin is bubbling and flaking like you had poured acid over him. However the actual wounds have closed up slightly. You try the Hydra anti-venom first, and for a moment his convulsions stop. However they pick up a second later. At this rate, you’re going to lose him. You try the nectar again, but it doesn’t do anything. You stare, but the amber liquid just mixes with the leaking black goo, and sluices to the floor, leaving it tacky and slippery.

“What the fuck,” you whisper, and then something occurs to you. You start singing the hymn again, and the wound reacts. More of the black slime bubbles to Landon’s lips, and you think that something about the combination of singing and nectar purges the wound. Your mind spins, color returns to Landon’s lips and his eyes slow their quick saccade, but it’s not enough. Something about the mixture isn’t strong enough. Kyla bursts through the door and Chloe is hot on her heels.

“What?” Kyla asks.

“Sing!” you tell her. She doesn’t ask questions, she just starts belting the first hymn that comes to mind. Thank the gods you’ve got such a competent second in command.

“Chloe, bring me more clean towels.” Landon’s pupils still completely and they look at you, wide and comprehending. More of the black liquid gushes up over his lips, and he starts to choke. You quickly undo one of the straps binding his wrists and help him sit up. He stays up just long enough to hack up some of the black stuff over the side, and then he collapses back onto the table with a shudder. You notice that the veins around his neck are purple as well, and hike his shirt up farther. The corruption appears to have spread through most of his body; it’s spidery purple tendrils standing out against his ghostly pale skin.

Landon’s eyes lock onto you, and he clutches at your shoulder with a trembling hand.

“Zeus . . . Fist,” he wheezes and then his body starts to seize up again. You try the Empousa anti-venom, but he barely relaxes for a second before he starts to convulse.

“Chloe,” you say, and she snaps to attention, dropping the towels by Austin’s side. “Go to Zeus’s Fist.” You’re not sure why he said it, but it must mean something. She races off without question. Austin works to clean off Landon’s body with the clean towels, wetting each cloth and wiping away the dead skin and the fizzing puss.

However, you’re still losing ground, and you don’t know what this is. The bite reacts to song and nectar which . . . You remember reading about that in a book about underworld magic. What was the line?

That which is of ancient corruption can be purged by that of ancient purity; essence is your cure.

Gods above, you have no idea that even means! Fuck! Still, there must be something. You leave Austin to clean the wound, and occasionally poor nectar over it. There must be something, in the cabinets, in the leftover Roman supplies from last summer . . . The unicorn drought, that . . . that’s ancient and pure, maybe . . . You rush back to Landon’s side. You pour a little bit of the unicorn drought over the bite, watching as it mixes with the nectar and black bile. He starts to convulse again, and cough up more blood and black liquid, but the spidery fingers in his neck start to retreat. Still, it’s not enough, you need something stronger.

You try the anti-venom for the basilisk, and he stops convulsing almost completely.

What is this? you wonder, watching as Landon hacks up more bloody black ick. It’s starting to become more blood than ick, and you wonder if it’s a good thing.
A good thing? Of course that’s not a good thing, he's coughing up blood, what the fuck is wrong with you? Why can’t you seem to think straight? You begin to slide into a panic, as the purple veins crawl up Landon’s neck again. You’re about to go for the cabinet again, when someone’s hand comes to rest on your shoulder.

“It’s no use.” You turn to find Chiron, in full horse form. He looks grim. You hadn’t heard him come in, when did he come in?

“What do you mean?” you say, and with his steady hand on your shoulder, you realize that your body is shaking.

“I’ve seen this before, the best you can do is let him go peacefully,” Chiron says, and you feel your heart hammering in your ears. How cruel, you think. Then you wonder where that thought came from. You’re not entirely sure. It flitters to the front of your mind, and then off again, like a jittery little bird.

“No.” You shake off your hand. “I’m not giving up until he does.”

Austin and Kyla look at you and then nod. You keep trying the unicorn drought and different anti-venoms, and anything you can, but in the end Landon sighs and his eyes flutter shut, and then his convulsions finally stop for good. You stand there looking at his body for a moment, and you can’t stop thinking about how there must have been something in one of your books that would have prepared you for this. You should have been prepared; you can’t believe you didn’t even know . . .

“Will, why don’t you go home and change?” Chiron says. You look down at your shirt, soaked in sweat and that gross black sludge. “The others will clean up.” You nod dully, and follow as Chiron gently steers you out of the infirmary.

You’re in the middle of your cabin, Chiron standing patiently near the door, when you finally have the presence of mind to ask.


“I beg your pardon?”

“You said you saw a bite like that before . . . Where?” Chiron is quiet for a moment, and that feeling you had during Spring Break sneaks back. There’s something not right about your room. You look around the cabin, and your eyes zero in on Birdy’s bunk. The whistle that usually hangs on the bedpost is gone, and so are his sheets. Come to think of it, you hadn’t seen Birdy during Spring Break . . .

“Where is Birdy?” you ask. Chiron is quiet.

“Where is Birdy?” you ask again.

“I’m sorry William. I did everything I could, but this was beyond even my knowledge.” He really does sound sorry. In a different moment, you would be amazed that even after he’s seen so many, Chiron’s heart could still break over the death of a single demigod. It would be amazing, in a different respect, to think about what a person could never get used to.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” you ask, clutching at the clean shirt between your hands. You vision starts to go red.

“I feared what you would do. You have never taken the death of your family well, and I worried that you would refuse to go back to school until you had answers,” he says quietly, and you look around
the cabin. It seems like a totally different place to you, foreign and strange, quiet and neat. It shouldn’t be this way.

“Bullshit,” you mumble.

“Pardon?” Chiron asks.

“Bullshit!” you scream, kicking over the nearest end table. The lamp on top goes tumbling to the ground, shattering into a million sparkling pieces, like stars without the sky to hold them. Like stars without anything to hold them up, like stars no one cared about any more, like demigods.

“That’s bullshit! You should have fucking told me. Why did no one fucking tell me?” Your voice is raw and cracking, aching with this . . . this rage. You have never felt like this before, this angry. It’s as new as the silence, but it comes to you more easily, and you think that you could be like this forever. It would be easy to just fill up this empty space with rage. The opening line of the Iliad is like that too, *Rage, oh goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son, Achilles.* Well you’re the son of Apollo, and you’ve been singing all your life, so half the battle’s already won.

A strange voice echoes at the back of your head, like the one that spoke to you in your dreams nearly a year ago, and gave you light. But this time the voice isn’t warm or bright or anything. It flitters in and out, like a breeze: *sing little demigod.*

Chiron lowers his head.

“I asked your friends and family not to tell you, just until we could confirm what had really happened,” he says quietly.

“Bullshit!” You shake, vision going red for an instant. When you come back to your senses, your hand feels like it’s on fire. Your fingers don’t quite bend correctly. *That’s probably broken,* some sane and detached part of your brain thinks. The voice earlier doesn’t come back, there’s just nothing in your head anymore. You wish it would come back. This silence is making you crazy.

“William, let me see,” Chiron says, moving gently towards you.

“Don’t fucking touch me.” You know it’s a petty thing to say. After all, your hand is going to need to be repaired at some point. However, Chiron pauses, and gives you your space. You hate how understanding he is. This is just like the time he told you your father specifically requested you not be around for the Oracle’s transformations. Chiron is always so gentle, and so wise. You hate it. You hate it. You want him to be *wrong* for once, just . . . Gods, you want to scream, but it feels like you can barely speak: *sing little demigod, or be silent.*

“I’m the cabin counselor. I’m supposed to take care of my family. How can I do that if you don’t tell me things?” you say, looking at your broken hand.

Shit, you really are starting to lose it aren’t you? Chiron starts speaking again and his voice grounds you.

“This was not something anyone could have protected or saved him from.”

*How cruel* . . . There it is again, that thought. You pause for a moment, trying to chase it, like a melody on the breeze.

“You know what left that bite, don’t you?” you ask, and Chiron does not move. You know enough about Chiron to know that’s an answer. You’re about to ask him when Chloe nearly collapses into the doorway of your cabin.
“Pollux!” she cries, “We found him, Zeus’ Fist, but he’s . . .” You don’t stop to hear the rest. The doctor in you takes over, and you’re thankful for it. You run towards the Big House, pulling your shirt on as you go. Your head clears, and for now, you can’t focus on anything but trying to save Pollux.

When you get to the infirmary, they’ve already moved Landon’s body, and laid Pollux out on a different table. Rather than a full bite, Pollux appears to only have been grazed. There’s a gash on his arm, and it pulses with the same sickly black color that Landon’s wound had.

Mr. D is hovering in the room, looking pale and stricken. He’s muttering something too himself, looming over Landon’s wound.

“Get out of the way,” you tell him. Mr. D’s eyes shoot up to you, filled with an immortal rage, but you push past him. He can rage all he wants but you have work to do. You use all the things that worked best with Landon, the unicorn drought, the Basilisk anti-venom, and the singing. It’s harder with only one hand, but you make do. Kyla’s voice has started to go a bit raw, so you have Austin join her while he helps you work.

The spidery purple corruption in his arm retreats a bit, but you know it won’t be enough.

“Are you really trying to save him?” Mr. D asks, his squishy purple face hanging limp with surprise. You don’t have time for this.

“If you’re going to ask stupid questions, get out of my hospital,” you snap. You’re pretty sure Mr. D is going to incinerate you on the spot, but instead, he looks like he’s about to cry.

“Save my boy,” he says instead, in a halting and awkward half-order, half-plea. You swallow down your irritation.

Of course I’ll save him.

“I won’t give up until he does,” you say, and you grab onto Pollux’s hand. You think about everything Pollux did when the two of you were grappling with Chris’ madness. That was unknown and wild, and complex. Maybe this bite is more magic than physical? You close your eyes and open up your heart to his, reaching out to try and get a read on his life force. A sickening and violent darkness lashes out at you as soon as you try. It physically knocks you away, sending you tumbling into the operating tables behind you.

“Will!” Kyla gasps, leaving a break in the hymn.

“Don’t stop singing!” you insist, and Kyla nods, continuing her song, while she tries to rush over and help you to your feet.

Ancient purity, of course! You curse yourself for not thinking of it earlier and pray that Landon can forgive you in the afterlife. Still, you’re missing one part. You have light, that’s purer in form than a hymn, but you still need a pure physical substance stronger than unicorn drought, something older, something . . .

Your eye catches on Mr. D. That will do.

You take Pollux’s hand and lean over him.

“Pollux, I’m going to try something that will hurt. You need to fight like it’s your brother’s life on the line.” His eyes snap to you wide and vulnerable. Then he gives you a faint nod and coughs up a bit of the black sludge. “Mr. D, do you want to save your son’s life?” you ask, and he nods, watching you carefully.
You don’t wait to run your plan by him first. Instead, you grab the sewing needle that’s on the little table by the bed and grab his hand. Your broken fingers scream in protest, but it’s almost dull, beneath the rush of adrenaline in your veins. Mr. D doesn’t have a chance to ask what you’re going before you hold his hand over Pollux’s wound and prick the heel of his palm. The immortal god of madness yanks his hand back as a single drop of golden ichor falls onto Pollux’s arm.

As soon as it touches Pollux you press your hands over his wound, and think about Cecil and Lou, smiling at you on your first day of camp and promising to protect you from all the scary things.

They were no older than you, no bigger, no stronger, but they were brave. They made you want to be brave.

The warmth starts in your chest and it’s easy to guide it, up through your shoulders, down to the palm of your hand. The tricky party is figuring out how to get it to Pollux, but you remember what Ester said.

It’s like sharing a secret.

You close your eyes, and simply let the light go. Listen up Pollux, this story’s for you.

When your light reacts with Mr. D’s single drop of ichor, the resulting explosion of light burns your hands, but you don’t stop. You let your light and the ichor chase the corruption from Pollux’s body, and hope to the gods he’s really fighting like he would have for Castor.

All of a sudden your hands are shoved back as Pollux sits up on the operating table and lurches over the side. Black sludge spills from his mouth and onto the floor in heaps. It seems like he’ll heave forever, but then he just stops. He snaps his mouth closed and collapses back onto the table.

You take his pulse, and feel his heart beating beneath his wrist, fast, but strong. His breathing is steady, though a bit labored. You almost can’t bring yourself to look at his arm, and risk knowing that the battle isn’t over, but when you look the spidery purple webs are gone. All that’s left is a natural bruise, and a bleeding cut. It’s deep enough that it will need stitches. You grab a new needle from the tray beside the operating table and begin to stitch him up.

“William,” Chiron’s voice shakes, “your hand.” Oh, that’s right. Your right hand was broken.

“Please don’t crowd my hospital,” you say despite the clearly empty room. You look over your shoulder to see Mr. D and Chiron muttering to each other, and then Chiron leaves the room. Your hands ache as you finish the stitches.

“Austin, can you get me a square of ambrosia and clean up the stitches? Kyla, you can take a break, but sing him a hymn every hour or so. The ichor did a number on his system. He might still die if we leave him,” you say as you turn to go.

“Where are you going? You should rest.” She reaches out for you, but you slip out of her grip despite your shaking body.

“I am. I’m going to go lie down in the rec room. It smells in here.” You nod to the seeping pool of black goo on the floor. Austin scurries over and hands you the ambrosia. You pop it in your mouth, enjoying the taste of peanut butter blossom cookies for a moment.

“Right,” she says, “I’ll get Argus to clean that up.”

“Thanks,” you mumble, as you stumble from the infirmary. The rec room is quiet and empty. You collapse into the nearest chair and sigh, looking down at the burns on your hands. They’re already
starting to shrink thanks to the ambrosia, but the skin is a somewhat horrifying vermillion. Perhaps you should have put a burn poultice on them before you left. Oh well, you can do that after you’ve calmed down for a bit. Right now, it seems like there is nothing more important in your life than remembering how to breathe and how to . . . remember.

Already your mind is starting to go empty, and the anger is starting to seep back in. You’ve stopped being a doctor for only a few seconds, and you’ve already gone back to being-

“How did you ever think to use ichor? It incinerates most things if it gets inside the body,” Mr. D asks, floating into the room. His presence startles you out of your spiraling train of thought. For a few seconds you’re struck dumb, but then your sense come right back to you.

“I uh, have a really old book that talks about ancient and unknown forms of magic. I mostly read it for the bits about underworld magic. For injuries that are rooted in old corruptions, it said that you need to use medicines that are of ancient essence. I figured ichor was as ancient as I would get, and then I used my light stuff as a more ancient form of a hymn.”

“That sound like total nonsense,” he says, sitting down across from you. He’s being strangely cordial, but then again, you always knew he cared a lot for his kids. You remember how he was always nagging the twins to be cautious over Iris message when they were helping you with Chris.

“It feels a little like nonsense sometimes, but most healing magic is all about the feeling. Hymns work because we believe they work, like . . . the way they use magic words in Harry Potter to channel a spell. It helps us focus on what exactly we want to happen. The light is sort of like concentrated belief. I literally poured my heart and soul into Pollux,” you say. Mr. D looks at you for a moment before a smile breaks out on his pudgy face.

“Now that is the stupidest thing I’ve heard since your dad tried to read me his haikus.” He shakes his head and waves a hand in the air. A diet coke appears, and Mr. D looks at it for a moment, as if dissatisfied.

“After all that, I still don’t get a drink,” he mutters, popping the lid and taking a sip. The room is quiet and you feel the edges of your anger sinking back in again. Why is Mr. D even here? What does he want with you? Why is he-

“Thank you for saving him. I’ll repay you for that,” he says.

“Don’t. I don’t save demigods for their parents. I save them because they’re people, and they deserve to live,” you snap. Mr. D watches you carefully.

“You’re awfully glib,” he says. You shrug.

“I guess I’m just used to speaking my mind.” You suppose that you’re also a bit full of yourself, but you pretend that you don’t notice. Mr. D hums.

“Explains Chiron,” he says, and then he tilts his head to the side a little bit. “You feeling alright kid?”

“Just fucking peachy.” You squeeze your hands into fists, only to hate yourself moments later. Right, burns, there are fucking burns on your hands because of some weird ass light magic and-

Mr. D taps a finger to your head, and it’s like all the wind has gone out of your sails. You’re not angry any more, but you’re not empty or silent, anymore either. You’re scared because you still don’t know what the fuck attacked Landon and Pollux, and elated because Pollux is alive, thank the gods above, and . . . Wow. The buzzing under your skin is gone. You could laugh, but your head is starting to spin. It’s like six months of repressed emotions have all slammed into you at once.
“What did you just do?” You look to Mr. D with wide eyes.

“There was a film in your mind, a type of madness. You’re not the first kid around here who’s got it. You’re not even the first of Apollo’s hell spawn to have it. I’ve got no idea where it came from or how to stop it. It seems like every time I rid one of you goblins of it, another one catches it, and then the old one’s got it again. That’s half the reason Chiron won’t let any of you monkeys out of camp. You can’t think straight. Not that you could before, but you’re more of a danger to others than usual.” Mr. D takes a long sip from his coke.

“I don’t want to talk about Chiron,” you say, looking around the room for something to draw your attention away from the guilty clench in your heart. Mr. D’s shoulders sag and he sighs.

“Listen, don’t be too hard on the old horse. He’s under a gag order from Olympus.” You hear thunder clap outside, but it doesn’t stop you from asking.

“What, why?”

“Your father disappeared on New Years and my father’s way of dealing with his problems is to keep everything quiet.” Another clap of thunder shakes the Big House, but Mr. D barely flinches. He just looks up at the ceiling, and starts yelling.

“The cat’s out of the bag already! You want to wait until this thing takes your child, or do you want to want these demigods to fix it?” Mr. D waits for a minute, but there’s no more thunder. He sinks a little lower in his chair and his pudgy purple face scrunches up for a moment in contempt, before settling back down into apathy. He continues like nothing happened.

“Artemis went looking for Apollo after he disappeared, but we’ve had nothing but radio silence from her since late January. Then the Muses disappeared the day before your Spring Break, a few hours before some campers found your little brother attacked in the forest. Zeus decided that the events might be related so the camp got caught up in his gag order. Chiron was tearing his hair out trying to find a way to keep all the campers involved from talking about what happened and investigating. Dad has been . . . strange recently. He’s mellowed out a lot in recent years, especially after that Perry kid lifted the Styx ban and made all the gods start recognizing their issues. Same thing with that Jeffery and his whole temple thing.”

Here it takes you a couple of seconds to realize that he meant Percy, where he said Perry, and Jason where he said Jeffery. You cannot believe he is still doing that. You would laugh, if it wasn’t so gods damned irritating.

“But recently, he’s started acting a lot like his older self, back when Olympus was in the ancient lands. He’s angry, and controlling and brutal. I’m not sure if it’s a side effect or a symptom of this mess we’ve gotten into.” Mr. D shakes his head, then looks at you with an unamused smile. “Any suggestions Doctor-Boy?”

You think about that seriously for a second, remembering the strange silences and the agitated nature of everyone you’ve known. You remember the silence in your own mind, the anger, the way thoughts seemed to fly out of your brain. It had started on New Years, hadn’t it? You can remember, with photographic clarity, the moment where you looked at Nico, ready to confess it all, and then a strange silence came to you. And Spring Break, with Austin, he lost his gift just when the muses disappeared.

“Symptom, just like the silence, I think,” you say earnestly, and Mr. D raises one eyebrow.

“Well, aren’t you a clever one?” He scoffs, like he already came to that conclusion, but there is a
thoughtful look in his eye that says maybe he hadn’t.

“I need to talk to Chiron.” You push yourself up from the table, cursing up a storm when your hands brush the surface of the table. You really should have gotten a burn poultice, but now is not the time.

“He’s on the porch. Good luck, Willard. You’re going to need it.” Mr. D waves you off breezily.

You think that you should start calling him Mr. B and see how much he likes it. The thought of his squishy purple face all twisted up in sputtering indignation makes you laugh a little to yourself. It’s the first time you’ve done that in months, and the feeling is so freeing that you laugh again, just a little bit. It sets you in the right mindset to talk to Chiron.

Chiron is seated in his wheelchair, looking out over the camp. The sky is still a dingy overcast, and you suppose it’s because of the awful silence that hangs over everything. Something is wrong with your camp, and maybe if you could put a name to it, you could figure out how to fight it. You don’t know how to go about finding the name, but if there’s one person on this camp who has an idea of where a demigod would start, it’s Chiron.

“Chiron,” you offer cautiously. Chiron starts, and looks over his shoulder at you. A thin, weary smile graces his face, but the corners of his eyes crinkle up so you know it’s sincere.

“William,” he says, and then he stops, like he’s not quite sure what else to say.

“Can I . . . I mean, may I sit down?” you ask, and Chiron chuckles a little at the self-corrected grammar.

“Of course.” You take a seat in the nearest rocking chair, minding where you put your hands. There’s no one in the volleyball courts, which is a shame. You love watching the games, and even playing when you get the chance. No one’s doing anything, and that breaks your heart more than just about anything. Camp’s not supposed to be like this. Sure, you’ve never really known a camp where there wasn’t a war going on, but you’ve also always known a camp full of laughter, and camaraderie. Even in the darkest days, before the battle, there would be kids, walking and moving together. Speaking.

You know you have to talk to Chiron, but where do you begin?

Thankfully, Chiron seems better at this than you are.

“I’m so sorry about Birdy, if I had thought to use ichor, perhaps I could have saved him.” His eyes fall from the camp to a point somewhere on the ground. There’s nothing to look at, but you know he’s seeing Birdy in the operating room. He’s playing out how he could have done things differently. You know, because you do that all the time.

“Chiron, I’m pretty sure it only worked because I used the blood of his godly parent. I mean, Pollux already has a lot of Mr. D’s blood in him technically? Anyone else’s blood might have burned him up. There’s no way you could have helped him with Apollo missing.” You try to be reassuring, but Chiron sits straight as a board in his seat. His eyes flicker towards the sky in a little bout of panic, and you rush to explain things.

“I know about the gag order, but Mr. D told me, so I think that Zeus has lifted it and I’m sorry for yelling at you earlier.” Everything comes out in a garbled rush, but at least you got it off your chest. Chiron softens.

“I take no offense. You had every reason to be furious with me. I only hope that you can forgive me,” he says. Gentle and wise and understanding as always. This time kindness strengthens your
guilt, and fills you with a rush of affection. This time, you really do marvel at how someone who has seen so much suffering can still open up their hearts like that. How can he still hope for something, to think towards the good?

You think that you used to think like that, to believe in the defiant power of people’s spirits. Somehow you’ve lost it. Somewhere in the past year you stopped thinking about the magnificent things that people can do, and the huge possibility of the future.

But gods be damned, you’re going to get it back. You want to feel that sense of purpose.

“Gods, Chiron, you were only trying to protect everyone.” You can’t say that you would have done the same, but at least you can say that you understand. Still, while your thoughts are clear and you can think ahead, you have to talk.

“There is one question I was hoping you could answer though.” Chiron nods at you to continue. “Did Birdy . . . say anything? Based on the other two, it looks like the poison takes a long time to take hold. I mean, I know that Birdy doesn’t speak, but did he . . . I don’t know, sign anything?” It feels a bit callous for you to worry about last words and monsters when your brother is dead, and gods, have they already had a funeral pyre? Did you miss his mourning, have you . . . No, you need to focus. You’re a doctor first, and a teenage boy second.

Chiron shakes his head.

“We found him very late. By that time he kept convulsing. There was little I could do but ease his pain,” Chiron says. All right there’s nothing there, but you have to think broader.

“Do you know what he was doing in the forest in the first place?” You ask.

“According to Austin, he had been going out there fairly frequently. He said that he could hear something strange, and that it was easy to hear in the silence. No one else reported strange sounds.” Chiron looks out over the fields of strawberries, and the cabins, all the way to the forest on the far side of camp. Before you can ask for more details, the Big House door groans open behind you.

“Chiron?” Chloe nervously peeks her head out the door. “Pollux is asking for you.”

“He’s awake?” you ask, blinking.

“Barely,” Chloe replies, “he won’t last long.” Chiron nods, wheeling his chair around and hurrying through the halls to the infirmary.

Inside they’ve moved Pollux to a cot, and changed his clothing to a hospital gown. The room still reeks of death, but at least Argus has cleaned up most of the goo.

“Chiron,” Pollux says by way of greeting when he spots the two of you.

“What were you doing the forest? I prohibited going there after what happened to Birdy,” Chiron says, though his admonishing holds no real bite.

“I know, I’m sorry but . . . A few of us wanted to investigate what happened. We didn’t think it was a random monster attack so we went to look around the area where we found Birdy, to see if we could find anything.” Pollux pauses, taking in a rattling breath.

“Landon, he said that the shadows felt weird so we split off and wherever the shadows were weirdest. Then he,” Pollux swallows and you can tell by the tears in his eyes that someone already told him that Landon didn’t make it.
“He suddenly tackled me to the side and we traveled through the shadows a bit. Something had scratched my arm, and it hurt so badly that I passed out until Chloe picked me up. Whatever was after us, I never saw it, but... Chiron it was no ordinary monster. I think... Look, in my clothes. We... We found something... before Landon tackled me.”

Kyla immediately begins to search through the clothing they put in the wash bin. After digging around in his pockets, she pulls out a shiny silver whistle.

“Birdy’s whistle.” Her voice cracks as she hugs the thing to her chest. She takes in a half a breath before shivering out a quiet sob.

“Base... of a tree.” Pollux’ eyes flutter shut and his breathing slows.

“Pollux?” Chiron asks, but the boy has already slipped into a quiet dream. “A tree... that could be anywhere.”

“No,” you say, “I know where he was.” You scramble to your feet, unsure of what you’re doing or what you hope to find.

“William, wait.” Chiron insists, rising from his chair. “Let’s gather a few people to go with us. There is safety in numbers,” he says.

“I’ll find some people and meet you by the forest edge,” you say, sprinting off around him and out of the Big House. You don’t stop running until you stand in the middle of the ring of Cabins. No one stirs behind their drawn shades and closed doors. If you didn’t know better, you would say it was midnight, and everyone was busy dreaming.

You put your fingers into the corners of your mouth, and let loose an ear splitting whistle, dragging it out until your lungs start to burn and your vision starts to swim. A few startled campers throw open their doors, looking around like they might find the Romans on their doorsteps again. When they see you standing alone, they just look annoyed.

“I need people to come to the forest with me. At least one or two, please!” you shout. For a second, those that came to the doorways turn back inside. However soon at least one person from each cabin comes trotting out. Percy, Jason, Piper and Drew, Annabeth and Malcolm, the Stoll brothers and Cecil, Clarisse, Miranda Gardiner, and every other cabin counselor from every other cabin all come out and gather around you. After a moment, you see children from the lesser gods’ cabins come over. Butch is easy to spot, along with the towering frame of one of the Nike kids. You don’t see Lou through the crowd until she pushes her way to the front and stands right next to you. Cecil does the same.

“What’s up, Will?” Percy asks, a little furrow of worry between his brows. Annabeth steps over to him, and quietly laces her fingers through his.

“I don’t know what you know, but Landon, son of Erebus, was killed about two hours ago. Pollux was attacked as well and he nearly died.” The little furrow of worry in Percy’s brow becomes harder, and a little downturn at the corner of his mouth means that you’ve already sold him. Whatever needs killing, you know he’ll be first in line.

“Shit,” Malcolm hisses, running a hand through his hair. Annabeth reaches over to place a hand on his shoulder. “I shouldn’t have... I...”

“It’s not your fault Malcolm,” she says in a voice that is more firm than comforting, like she knows for a fact that he could not have been totally to blame.
“Anyone want to fill me in on what’s going on?” you ask, because you can sense that most of these campers know more than you do.

“A bunch of us weren’t really okay with what happened with Birdy,” Cecil says quietly. It’s strange for him to talk in front of a crowd, but when you look over at him, it’s almost like he can’t see anyone else you. You can see that he’s asking you for forgiveness, even before he really starts his story.

“So we decided to look into it. The circumstances were weird. We found him at the edge of the forest, with his huge bite, and even Chiron didn’t know what it was. He wouldn’t let us investigate. Not to mention, the atmosphere was getting weird. The sky started to go overcast sometimes, and Chiron wouldn’t talk about that either.

“So we all did what we could to look into it. Kyla and Austin looked through about half the books you own to try and find the monster. The rest of us tried to figure out what was going on with the camp any way we could. Lou was looking up everything that Hecate cabin had on crossroads and monsters. Pollux and Malcolm started talking, about Mr. D saying a lot of kids were struck with a kind of madness, and about how it really started to get bad after Birdy died. Then Malcolm got the idea that maybe we should go do a sweep of the forest, so we broke up into groups. After that . . .” Cecil trailed off. “I was in a different group.”

“Landon said the shadows were strange,” Miranda cut in. Malcolm opened his mouth, as if to say something, but just as quickly shut it. “When we got into groups, he kept saying the shadows were strange but he couldn’t exactly pinpoint where. We, I mean, Malcolm, Austin and I, all thought it would be better to keep doing the grid search, like we were doing. But Pollux, he said that he wouldn’t mind following Landon around for a bit, so they split off. They should have been safe; they were wondering a part of the forest that was pretty close to camp. We found Landon after we backtracked. He was limping towards the edge of the forest. When he saw us he tried to cry out, but instead he just collapsed.”

Mirada shivers a little and wipes away the tears forming in the corner of her eye. She doesn’t say anything for a while, and you take that as your cue to speak again.

“From what Pollux said, they were attacked a little while after you all split up. Landon shadow traveled Pollux to Zeus’s Fist and then ran off to distract whatever attacked them. Right before they were attacked, they found Birdy’s whistle at the base of the lookout tree. I don’t know what I’m looking for, but I think that if I go there, I might know what happened.”

“Has Chiron lifted the ban on the forest?” Jason asks, and you nod.

“Chiron was under orders from Zeus not to say anything, but Mr. D got it lifted a little while ago.” You wave a hand at the sky.

“Why couldn’t Chiron talk about Birdy?” Lou asks, and you give the group a brief overview of your father’s disappearance, and then Artemis and the Muses going missing as well.

“Shit,” the Stoll brothers mutter in unison, looking between them and shaking their head.

“Anyway, now that it’s safe to talk about it and investigate, he told me to grab some demigods and meet him by the forest,” you say. The kids around you all look to each other, muttering about something for a little while. Then Clarisse breaks the silence.

“I need my spear,” she says, and promptly turns to fetch it from her cabin. The others all nod, and begin to break away as well.
“I’ll see you all at the forests’ edge!” you call before things can get a little out of your control. Malcolm comes up to you, looking off to the side.

“I’m sorry about . . . in the hospital.”

“Yeah well, that sort of thing is bound to happen when you always assume that you’re the smartest person in the room,” you say with a shrug. Instead of snapping back at you, Malcolm just shrinks a little bit. When he turns to go, you fight back a sigh.

“It’s fine though. Really. Just, next time trust me,” you say, running a hand through your hair. He looks back at you, and nods once.

“Okay.” And then he’s gone as well, trailing after Annabeth to get a protractor, or whatever Athena kids use in a time of need. Maybe a book about the history of shitty demigod lives.

“Hey Will?” Lou taps you on the shoulder, jostling you from your thoughts. “You look like poop. Are you okay?” You snort a laugh, looking down at your black splattered clothes and the burns on your hand.

“Mostly. In some ways I’m actually better than I’ve been in months.” You try to laugh, again, but nothing some out, so instead you just have a tense smile plastered to your face.

“Sorry,” Cecil whispers, but you just clap him on the back.

“For what? Covering half the story? Honestly I’m mostly pretty proud that you stood up in front of a crowd like that,” you say, and Cecil hugs you instead of giving a reply. Lou does too, but after about half a second they both reel back.

“Okay, but really though, you smell like death,” Cecil says, looking down at the sticky black spots now covering his shirt.

“Ew,” Lou mutters, looking at her own clothing.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll go get changed.” You shuffle off towards your cabin. Inside, your siblings are all sitting together on the floor, quietly toying with strings of their clothing. When Victoria sees you come through the door, she immediately pops to her feet.

“Will, we heard everything, can we come?” she asks. The twins nod fervently, as do all of the little ones.

“Right now, I need someone to take care of the infirmary,” you say, laying a hand on her shoulder. She twists her shirt in her hands, and then nods.

“Okay. We’ll take care of it!” All of the little ones look around helplessly. They’re usually not allowed in the infirmary for obvious reasons, so you take the twins aside quickly.

“I want you to keep them away from the forest okay? I think . . . I think maybe this thing has it out for us. Apollo’s kids, I mean,” you whisper, and the twins look between themselves for only a moment before nodding.

They lead out all of the little ones, each taking a hand and guiding them down the steps. They tell, bright, pretty lies about how they’re all going to get to do really cool healing magic stuff, yes, even you Nissa.

Your cabin is quiet again, but this time the silence doesn’t unsettle you quite as much. You strip and
change quickly, realizing a bit late that all of your stuff is still shoved into a duffle at the big house. After a second of rooting through drawers (when had your family started to actually use the dressers scattered around the room?) you’re able to borrow some clothes. Your hands still burn, but it’s manageable. Hopefully, you can get some more ambrosia before you go, and you’ll be back to using your hands without pain by tomorrow. The creek of the door behind you draws your attention away, and for a moment you think that Victoria is back to insist that you let her go with you.

Instead, you see Nico.

“Hey,” he says, standing in the doorway, looking stricken.

“Nico, come in. Are you alright?” He takes a few hesitant steps through the doorway, squinting around the room like the posters of rock stars and the overhead lights are just so glaringly brilliant. You close the distance, standing close enough that you could take his hand if you were braver.

“Yeah, I just. I wanted to apologize. About Birdy,” he says, looking at you and swallowing. Dread settles in the pit of your stomach, as her tries to speak again, but seems to lose his voice.

“Nico?”

“Will, I . . .” He trails off, looking to the side with a frustrated little scowl. “I should have said something, I’m so sorry.”

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“Will, I . . .” He trails off, looking to the side with a frustrated little scowl. “I should have said something, I’m so sorry.”

“Nico, that’s what you were trying to tell me over Spring Break, wasn’t it?” you ask, and Nico’s shoulders sink. Now he only looks defeated, ashamed.

“I should have tried harder, I just, I was afraid of upsetting you too, and Chiron said that you . . . Well you told me about what happened when Lee died, and with the forest, I just . . . I’m so sorry Will.” His fingers clench shut into tight fists, as guilt takes over.

Instead of saying anything, you just throw your arms around his shoulders and press your cheek against the top of his head. Your hands aren’t happy about this arrangement, but the rest of you is quite pleased. For the first second, Nico is as stiff as a board. Then he relaxes. He doesn’t wrap his arms around you, but you can feel him lean his body against yours. His fingers ghost over the edge of your shit, like he wants something to hold onto, but he’s afraid to touch you.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers again, and you squeeze him tight one last time before holding him at arms length. You need to know that he is looking at you when you tell him it’s all right.

“Nico, you did what you thought would protect me. I was pissed when Chiron first told me that everyone had kept that secret, but it’s not your fault. Fuck, it’s nobody’s fault it’s not even Chiron’s. He was under a gag order from Zeus, who’s being influenced by whatever this monster is.” Even after all that, Nico doesn’t look convinced.

“I just . . . I wish I could do something about it, to make it up to you.” His right hand wraps slowly around the hilt of the Stygian iron sword hanging from his side. That’s not what you meant, not by a long shot, but with Nico, that’s probably as close as you’re going to get.
Chapter End Notes

Remember how I said that this chapter would come out some time later that week? I lied. I am sorry. But in my defense, NaNoWriMo started in November, and I also started working. So I was doing a lot of stuff. Anyway, I'm just going to stop giving projections of when the next chapter will be out, because I never do meet these self imposed deadlines.
I especially feel bad about it to the people who left comments about how excited they were for a second chapter. Forgive me.
But on the bright side, most of you guessed who the goddess was right off the bat. Seriously, I thought I was being real subtle, but you guys nailed it. Good job.

Okay so, this beginning the obligatory quest arc that is in like 99.9% of all PJO fan fiction. Just to let you know that you'll be kind of committing to a story that's probably longer than you thought it would be.
Anyway, there was more of Keat's Hyperion mentioned in this chapter, but as always I try to explain everything about the myth in chapter so you don't have to have read it. If you have any questions feel free to hit me up with comments bellow. Or you can message me on the fanfiction tumblr I sometimes use, honeycoolers. Lol, I don't even have an icon, but whatever.

This is a bit spoilery so if you don't want some light spoilers, this is the end of the notes:

Also, I feel like I should tell you, that I came up with the plot for this quest way before Rick announced what the Trials of Apollo were going to be about, and I am so mad. This is like the second fucking time that Rick announced a new story and it ended up being the exact same as my fanfiction plot.
Anyway I'll try to keep the plot at least a little interesting, so it doesn't end up being some weird, slightly off, retelling of the Trials of Apollo.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

This chapter is much shorter than the other chapters, but I haven't updated in like 2 months so I wanted to at least put something out there so no one thinks this story just died off.
In this chapter Will climbs a tree and then falls out of the tree like 4 times.

Trigger warning for a panic attack. If that sort of thing makes you uncomfortable to read about, stop reading at the part where Annabeth says "What do you need Will?" and pick back up again at the part where will says "After a while your breathing returns to normal."

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

They say that Zeus’ Fist looks like a pile of shit and you’ve always been partial to that description because you think its a pretty fitting metaphor for Zeus himself. Of course you have never voiced this thought. Death by lightning might be a fairly painless way to go, but you’re rather fond of your life, and would like to keep it for a while longer.

You stop at the rock to look at for a few minutes, and behind you the party clatters to a halt. Something about Zeus' fist catches our attention. Chiron is a couple feet back, following you all closely, but not too closely. It makes you nervous to have him separated off, but you know he’ll always be behind. He’s like a mother, keeping an eye on all his children.

“This is where they found Pollux right?” Percy asks, eying the crevices as if the monster is hiding somewhere in between. This place used to have an opening to the Labyrinth but it’s shut now. Or at least it was shut. You heard from someone that the Labyrinth was rebuilding itself. With your mysterious monster on the loose, that might be a clue.

“Yeah . . . Anyone who was on that crazy Doors of Death quest, feel free to answer, but I heard rumors that the Labyrinth was opened again during your quest. That’s not true is it?” You swallow, and squeeze your eyes shut, hoping that the answer is going to be no.

“Yes,” Nico says.

A hush falls over the party, or at least as much of a hush as ADHD demigods wearing full battle armor could muster.

“It’s closed now though.” Annabeth is quick to do crowd control. Her voice is firm, but not overly loud.

“No it's not,” Nico says.
“How do you know?” Annabeth’s question is not unkind, just curious.

“How do you know?” You turn to look at Nico and the guarded way he keeps his head slightly ducked, hands close to his body. Everyone has their eyes on him, waiting, watching, expecting.

“But I thought she killed Pasiphaë?” Jason asks, his face drawn and serious. Nico gives one short shake of his head.

“She said that she sent her though a trapdoor in the Labyrinth. But a door in the Labyrinth only leads to more doors.” Nico kicks at a little piece of rubble. It goes flying, clattering across the other rubble of Zeus’ Fist before disappearing. It probably just joined a host of other, indistinguishable, rocks, but from where you’re standing it looks an awful lot like that pebble just slipped into the Labyrinth itself.

“She fell down a trap door, that sounds dead to me,” Clarissa says.

“I lived alone in the Labyrinth for months, I know what I’m talking about. If we’re lucky she tripped and fell into Tartarus down there, but we’re demigods.” Nico doesn’t elaborate on the demigod part. It’s clear enough to all of you that what he means is if demigods were lucky, none of this would be happening.

“Well, that gives us a possible means by which the monster has been getting around. We can come back to this later, what’s important is that we get to the lookout tree, find what we need, and get back without incident,” Annabeth says, always the voice of reason. You wouldn't believe how level headed and focused she is if you hadn't seen her act just the same two years ago when the Titian lord was marching on Manhattan.

“She’s right. We have to keep moving.” Percy says. Jason echoes some iteration of this, and once again half the camp is moving towards the tree. Underneath the sound of the armor clanking, the word grows quite. Very quiet.

It’s not until you can see the broad side of the lookout tree’s massive trunk, that you realize you’ve successfully gathered all of the camp’s most powerful and important demigods in one place. Forget monsters, if there was so much as a forest fire, most of you would be goners, and the camp would lose its metaphorical head. Not to mention, if all of you are here, who’s taking care of the camp?

“Hey, Annabeth, can I talk to you for a second?” you say. Everyone else stutters to a stop, but you wave them on ahead. They all continue to stand there. Chiron looks a little worried, but he tries to shuffle everyone off.

“Sure, Will,” she says, apparently unfazed. You swallow, eyeing the little cluster of people.

“Um, alone?” The thought of camp being basically unguarded right now is starting send you into a panic, not that there’s anything any of you could really do to stop it. You don’t know what this thing is and unless every God in Olympus decides to spontaneously donate blood, you’re fucked, because there’s not really a cure and-

“Wha-oh. Go on ahead everyone, we’ll be right there . . . Thanks Chiron. Anyway, what did you need, Will?” Annabeth asks, and Chiron manages to herd everyone to the tree. They disappear just beyond your sight, though a little thicket of ground cover. In their wake it is silent. Nothing in the forest makes a noise, no leaf rattles, and no birds sing.

How do you fight something when you don’t know what you’re looking for, when no disaster has happened to give you a clue, when the closest to an answer you’ve come is seeing two casualties? This thing isn’t a Titan, or an apocalypse, or a deadline, there’s just a slow creeping, wearing away,
of everything around you. How do you fix something that’s not broken yet? You don’t know what you’re doing. You’re not a hero; you’re a doctor. What are you supposed to do? Your heart is beating like a bird, trapped behind your ribs, frantic and afraid, struggling, fighting, beating itself against the bars of its cage, desperate to get free.

You have met something you cannot beat. You cannot cure this. You cannot fix this.

There is nothing standing between you and a monster.

There is nothing standing between your family and a monster.

Everyone will die because you are incompetent.

You can’t stop me.

The words slither through the back of your mind, as the bird in your heart lodges itself in your throat. The world before you disappears, like you are no longer able to comprehend what you see, like some part of your brain has decided that it is going to stop trying.

You wish you could go back to being numb.

“Tell me what you need, now.” The voice is smooth and clear.

I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know what I need, I don’t know-

“That’s okay. You can do this. I just need you to concentrate on breathing.”

Breathing, breathing, how did I do that, isn’t this supposed to be automatic?

“That’s it, good job. I’m proud of you.”

Proud?

Your eyes start to focus again, but everything is just coming as a blur of color shifting too much and too fast.

“Will, focus on my voice. Close your eyes if you need to.”

You squeeze your eyes shut, body shivering like darkness and coldness go hand in hand.

“What you are feeling is scary, but it is not dangerous.”

It is, it is, its-

“Fear cannot hurt you.”

It can, it-

“Will, can you hear my voice? Then you know I’m here.” This voice is different, still smooth and clear, but there is a quality about it that is a little more personal. You can’t quite place it, but you know.

The voice in your head comes back, slithering and hissing and nothing but violent sounds, angry sounds.

“What’s bothering you is a thought. It’s not real, and it can’t hurt you. I know it feels like you’re
really going to die, and that is scary, but you won’t.”

_It’s a lie, it’s a lie, it’s a lie, don’t listen to her._

“I won’t let you . . . Will, you’re a doctor. You know what kills demigods and this isn’t it. You can push through. I’ll keep talking until you do.”

**SHUT UP. MAKE HER SHUT UP.**

That’s it. Your eyes snap open as air floods into your lungs. Something inside of you snaps, tipping the balance from flight to fight. You can feel your head clear as something close to righteous indignation takes over. Whatever was in your head pushed too hard.

Feeling comes back to you in little bits. First comes your fingertips and the mushy press of earth where you dug your fingers into the ground. You’re on your hand and knees. Okay you must have collapsed at some point. Then there’s something on your back, a hand slowly rubbing circles against your armor. You hear it more than feel it. Your chest aches, but that’s probably because you were hyperventilating. Your breathing is still quick, but you’re working on taking deep breaths. Then you realize you’re soaked in sweat and your clothes are clinging to your body as it shakes.

After a little while your breathing returns to normal, and you sit back on her heels. Annabeth is hovering uncomfortably a few feet away, but Piper is sitting by your side and Drew Tanaka is right in your face. Piper’s hand slips from your back and you give her a thin smile in thanks.

“What happened to you?” Drew demands. There’s an echo of the smooth and clear ringing tone to her voice, and you realize that she and Piper must have been charm speaking to calm you down. Drew gets to her feet, and brushes mud off her knees.

“I, uh. I think I had a panic attack,” you say after a moment. It’s weird, that hasn’t happened to you since Lee died, but well . . . You haven’t exactly been emotionally stable these last few hours.

“Well, but, why?” Drew asks. Her tone is loud and whining, but the twist of her face is actually somewhat concerned.

“There doesn’t necessarily have to be a trigger, but if there was that might help you avoid this in the future,” Piper cuts in. She stands up and glares at Drew for a second, before Drew cows and looks down at the ground.

“Um, I’m not sure exactly . . . When did you two get here?” You point at them, and then look over at Annabeth, who steps up now that it appears that you’re somewhat back to normal. She offers you a hand up, and you take it gladly. Everything about your body is uncomfortable, week, and shaky, but Annabeth lets you lean against her shoulder for a moment.

“You didn’t respond to me after I sent everyone away, and then when I tried to shake you out of it, you started to hyperventilate. I don’t have a lot of experience with emotional things, so I asked Piper to come help. Drew overheard.” Annabeth purses her lips, and cuts a glare over at Drew, who folds her arms over her chest. Her shoulders hunch up in a clear defensive position.

“You didn’t respond to me after I sent everyone away, and then when I tried to shake you out of it, you started to hyperventilate. I don’t have a lot of experience with emotional things, so I asked Piper to come help. Drew overheard.” Annabeth purses her lips, and cuts a glare over at Drew, who folds her arms over her chest. Her shoulders hunch up in a clear defensive position.

“I helped,” she bites back with a sneer.

“Yes, and we’re thankful, but you were a little aggressive,” Piper says. There’s a little pinch in between her eyebrows that says she’s both annoyed and embarrassed on her sister’s behalf.

“No, she was okay,” you say quickly, standing up on your own. Drew looks at you from the corner of her eye. She doesn’t turn your way, and keeps her body closed off.
“Really, you were great, actually. How did you know to say stuff like that, about me being a doctor?” you ask, hoping that the rawness vestiges of shaky panic that leak into your voice don't get mistaken for insincerity.

“During the Battle of Manhattan you said stuff like that to me, about like, having to fight for it or whatever, and not letting your head, get in the way. It made me feel less afraid, so I figured it had to, work both ways. Anyways, we’re even now.” She huffs and starts to stomp back towards the lookout tree, now that you’re clearly not going to die.

“I told you that you didn’t owe me, and even if you did, didn’t you say you repaid me?” you call after her.

“You didn’t even kiss him, so it doesn’t count!” she says over her shoulder without stopping.

“You’re just nice! Admit it, Drew Tanaka you have a good heart deep, deep, deep down!” you shout after her. She turns around. Her face is beat red and her fingers are clenched so tightly you worry she might actually hurt herself.

“Shut up!” she yells back before storming through the undergrowth. You laugh a little.

“Aw, look at that. I think I made a friend,” you say, turning to look at the other girls. They look back at you like you are clearly crazy, Piper especially.

“Anyway, are you sure you’re alright. Do you remember why this happened?” Annabeth asks.

“I realized that we had gathered all of the camp’s strongest demigods and all of the leadership in one place, and left the camp pretty open, so I started to get worried.” Annabeth’s eyes go a little wide, her lips pursed.

“That triggered it?” Piper asks, and you shake your head, then nod.

“Sort of? I started to panic, and then I heard this voice in my head telling me I couldn’t stop what was happening.” You take a few deep breaths, calming yourself when the memory makes your heart rate spike.

“Like someone talking to you? I didn’t see anything, but maybe it was a ghost?” Annabeth frowns, folding her arms over her chest.

“No, I’m pretty sure it was a voice in my head.” You run a hand through your hair to peel it off your sweaty forehead.

“There was a voice in your head?” Annabeth says. She makes a face like she thinks you really need some professional help.

“Yeah, it’s happened before. A couple of hours ago, when Chiron broke the news about Birdy, I . . . I heard something talking to me, messing with my head. I got so mad that I punched the wall and broke my hand. The whole thing rattled me, but my hand’s fine now,” you say, which is a boldfaced lie. Your hand might not be broken anymore, but your palms are starting to blister a little bit. However now is not the time to mention that. Annabeth’s brow furrows, and she gets a very serious look in her eye, though she says nothing.

“Do you want to go back to camp?” Piper asks, placing a hand on your shoulder.

“What? Fuck no. If this is what it’s been doing to campers all semester, I can’t give up now.” You pat the hand that’s on your shoulder because you don’t know what the fuck else you’re supposed to
do with it. Piper frowns a little harder.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t talk to Mr. D?” She takes her hand off your shoulder and shifts nervously from foot to foot.

“I already talked to him. I just want to get to the tree. This might sound crazy, but I feel like I need to. I know I can find something if I go, and I think this thing trying to scare me just proves that.” Even as you say it the words sound desperate and immaterial. There’s nothing around, nothing but trees, dingy sunlight, and natural shadows. For a second, you think that maybe you are crazy.

“You do sound crazy,” Annabeth deadpans, but Piper elbows her in the side. Right now you really can’t afford lose your confidence, but damn if it's not hard to listen to reason.

“But we respect your feelings, and understand that trying to reason through everything will sometimes get you killed. Isn’t that right Annabeth?” Piper gives her a smile that implies they've been in this situation before.

Annabeth rolls her eyes before mumbling, “That was one time.” Piper gives her another look. Eventually Annabeth nods her head.

That’s good enough for you. If they both believe that you're not totally crazy you'll be fine. You be fine, you have to be fine.

You shake yourself out once and carefully readjust your armor. Then you plaster on a smile and march off towards your party.

“What took you so long?” Clarisse asks, thumping her spear against the ground. Your mind stalls out, because you realize a second too late that you can’t just tell everyone you had a maybe-monster-induced-definitely-monster-exacerbated-panic-attack. Thankfully, Annabeth is nothing but prepared.

“Will brought up an excellent point. With the majority of camp leadership here, the rest of the camp might be vulnerable, but if we split up there’s a danger to the search party. However, we decided that since we already made it here, splitting off would be pointless. It would be best to get things over with. He didn’t want to worry people unnecessarily.” She smiles, wide and thin and oddly authoritative. Chiron’s horse legs skitter around a bit, but he smiles at everyone too, very calm, very proper.

“But wait, are you saying this thing might attack the camp while we’re out?” Travis asks. Annabeth shakes her head.

“No, definitely not. The attacks we’ve seen so far only happen to those who are relatively alone. All of the cabins at camp have more than three campers inside, or their only occupants are her.” She nods to Percy and Jason who smile and wave, the pictures of heroic confidence.

All except for the minor gods, You think, but you don’t voice your thoughts. Annabeth’s trying to keep people calm, and you won’t ruin it. Besides you know the minor god kids are tight. Hopefully they’re mostly bundled up in one or two peoples’ cabins. Out of the corner of your eye, you can see Lou get anxious. She looks at you, and you try to give her a look back that says all of your thoughts. She seems to get it because she nods. She doesn’t look happy, but she nods.

You skirt your way around the group, and over to tree. Then you start to climb when no one says anything else. The first branches aren’t for a while, but there are hand and footholds nailed into the truck. Chiron figured the if he couldn’t stop kids from climbing the tree, he’d at least make it a little safer.
“Uh, Will, what are you doing?” Cecil asks.

“Climbing. This is the lookout tree. Birdy would be up doing lookout,” you say. Your wince as the wood rubs against the blisters on your hands.

“Are you sure that’s safe?” His tone says he knows that you’re hurting yourself.

“Entirely.” you call back without looking down at him. You can practically hear him dying to call you out about the whole ‘your hands are burned and I know they’re burned, you asshole’, but he doesn’t. Thank the gods he knows this is too important to you.

“I’ll follow him up,” Nico says beneath you.

“Why?” You don’t really mind that he’s following you, but you’re pretty sure you know what you’re looking for. You have half an idea of what this thing is, but you can’t say it until you have the name. Two sets of eyes wouldn’t really help.

“When you’re up that high no one will be able to see you, so you’ll basically be alone. The monster could just push you out of the tree and then you’d be dead and we’d all be screwed,” Nico snaps. You can hear the shing-click of his sword sliding into its sheath.

“What are you going to do, stab it?” You scoff, climbing despite the sting of your blisters.

“Landon said this thing came from the shadows, right? Then I’m probably the only one who can,” Nico snarks right back.

“Touché,” you say as you haul yourself up onto the first of the branches. Now things are tricky. The branches are sometimes a little far apart, a little strangely bent.

You’re sure that down on the ground a more reasonable person is thinking that they should just send Jason up to the top since he can fly, but you’re not reasonable, you don’t particularly like Jason, and you do like Nico, so you’re not going to bring it up if no one else does.

Your old friend, the nervous buzzing under your skin, returns once your make it to the first branches. In response, you start to sing to yourself.

“I have often dreamed, of a far off place, where a hero’s welcome will be waiting for me.” You think you’re being quiet, but maybe it’s so quiet around you that your voice carries.

“Are you singing?” Nico calls up, much closer than he was before. You look over your shoulder and find that he’s only a few branches below. He must’ve been a fast climber because you had quite the lead on him to start with.

“Yeah,” you say. You wait for a few moments for him to catch up to you.

“I have often dreamed, of a far off place, where a hero’s welcome will be waiting for me.” You think you’re being quiet, but maybe it’s so quiet around you that your voice carries.

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“Why?” Nico frowns a little bit, and you guess that’s a fair question. Nico’s probably not used to having one of his quest mates singing on the job.

“I’m scared, dude. I don’t do this kind of thing very often, and singing always helps calm my nerves.” You can feel the heat rush to your cheeks when you admit that you’re scared. Nico probably thinks that you’re a coward, but if he knows the truth, he probably won’t give you more flack for singing. Out of the corner of your eye you can see Nico blink at you with wide eyes, before nodding a little.

“Okay. What were you singing?” Nico presses on, out pacing you a little, and you scramble after
“Uh, a song from the movie Hercules.” You wonder if that’s one of the movies Nico’s actually seen. You get your answer when he looks down and gives you a flat look.

“Seriously? Singing a song from the movie Hercules makes you feel better?” He scoffs, and you bristle.

“Shut up. It was Michael’s favorite song, Birdy’s too. Michael used to sing it to him, whenever Birdy would get scared.” You try and swallow back the sad thoughts that come with saying that, but the last time you heard Michael sing rushes back to you, like it was happening again.

The light in the room was a soft orange, faint, filtering in from a little part in the baroque curtains that covered the window. In the hotel, before you all left to set up camp on the bridge, Birdy couldn’t sleep. The other little ones were tucked into bed, but Birdy was just sitting on the floor, looking out between the curtains like maybe he could watch over you all, like maybe watching would make you safer, like maybe watching would make more of his siblings come back. Michael sat next to him, running his hands through his hair and singing softly. Michael never had a beautiful voice, but it was always sweet for the way he sang unguarded. Birdy didn’t fall asleep, but he pretended to, and that was enough.

The memory makes your eyes burn.

“Oh,” Nico says.

“It’s fine.” You shrug, but it’s not really fine. Your eyes still burn, but you're pretty good at willing it away.

The rest of the climb is quiet after that.

“Will, we should stop here. The branches are getting too thin. It’ll be dangerous to climb much farther.” Nico stops, but you keep climbing.

“Just a little farther,” you insist. You're not there yet, but you're close, you can feel it. Out of the corner of your eye, you see a pair of symbols pass by. It's a little sun and a skull. Something inside of your stirs, something that reminds you that bad things don’t have to make good things any less good.

“Catch me if I fall!” you say, looking over your shoulder and smiling. Nico frowns and rolls his eyes.

You start to sing again, because now that you’re truly going this alone, you’re scared.

“It's an uphill slope but I won't lose hope 'til I go the distance, and my journey is complete.” As cheesy as the song is, it settles your mind, and helps you push onwards. The branches creek and groan under your weight, but you have to get higher.

“To look beyond glory is the hardest part, for a hero’s strength is measured by his heart.” The silent world swallows your song, swallows the echo, swallows the verse, and the chorus, and the thought itself.

There’s something here. There’s a flickering in the shadows around you, but you’re close. You’re close, just a few more feet, you can feel it.

“Will?” Nico calls suddenly, his voice choked with panic. It cracks the thick pallor of the air.

“I’m alright Nico, what’s wrong?” You stop climbing for a second, and the flickering, watched
feeling, grows a little fainter, a little less distinct.

“I thought I . . . No I did. Will, I felt something in the shadows. Come back.” His tone is urgent, though firm. You almost do start to climb back down, but you can’t. Not yet.

“Sure thing, just give me a second,” you call down, heaving yourself up onto one last branch.

This branch juts out far from the side of the tree, a little thicker than the other branches around you. It’s wide enough for you to stand on, like a balance beam, but you don’t push your luck. You skirt out onto the branch, eyes scanning the wood. There’s something here, something, and you know it.

“No Will, you need to come down right now.” You can hear a rustle down below as Nico starts to come after you. Something catches your eye a little farther out on the branch. Something that looks like it was carved.

“Nico give me a second,” you yell back, eyes trained to the mark, as you inch forward. The flickering presence around you has grown thicker, almost like smoke.

“Will, there is something in the shadows!”

The marking on the wood doesn’t look like English. You stare for a moment, before you realize that you’re looking at the letters upside down. You skirt a little further out on the branch. It shakes in answer, but you don’t notice.

There are four letters.

Πύθω

And half of a letter, more like a slash mark, like Birdy didn’t get the chance to finish carving.

It doesn’t matter, you know what it says. Any child of Apollo would only need half the letters to know.

“Will!” The last of Nico’s words are drowned out by the sound of something hissing.

You lift your eyes from the bark, and meet the eyes of a snake with a head the size of a shield just inches from your own. Its body curls around the length of the branch back towards the trunk, brown and yellow speckled. The tree groans, branches shake, and everywhere around you, pine needles rain down, as the snake takes a physical form. It opens its mouth, and you watch helplessly as a pair of massive fangs flash out.

If I could collect some of the venom, we could make an anti-venom, you think. This thought is promptly followed by, I’m going to die.

You scramble back on the branch a little ways, but there’s honestly nowhere to go. You’re too far out as it is, any second this branch could splinter. Down below you can hear Nico screaming your name, but the sound barely registers in the back of your mind as the snake curls up on the branch. The snake sits poised, as if ready to strike.

There is nothing you can do, you didn’t bring weapons with you, and you have nowhere else to run.

It squeezes its massive body around the trunk of the tree and the wood groans. Huge shards of the tree splinter out under the sheer force of the monster's muscle.

Something strange occurs to you then.
It’s real. This thing is real, not some shadowy creature, or figment, but something real. A piece of the real thing, or the real thing itself, you’re not sure. This thing is real, but it was afraid you learning a word, a name.

*If I could just put a name to it, I could fight it.*

You had thought that earlier, on the porch with Chiron. You were thinking metaphorically, but maybe . . .

It lunges towards you, fangs sparking in the dingy sunlight, like it was swallowing down all the light that managed to leak through the overcast skies.

“*Python!*” The words leaves your lips, thin and raw, thrown before you like a shield.

There’s a crack, followed by a groan. The branch under your feet jerks, and Python’s jaws sap closed in the air above your head, as your heart jumps into your lungs.

The branch gives way. You’re falling, crashing down through the trees. Thin branches nick your exposed skin, as you wiz past, crisscrossing your skin with red lines like shooting stars. Above you Python writhes like you physically struck it, hissing and thrashing. Everywhere its massive body is curled around a branch, it squeezes, and snaps the thing in two. Even the trunk isn’t safe, splintering and groaning under the weight.

*This whole tree is going to come down,* you think, as your back slams into a branch and your head snaps back against it. The air rushes out of your lungs, and the world blinks in an out. Python follows you, crashing down with the branches it has broken until it slams onto yours. You try to scramble up but your head tilts the world around too freely, and you are too slow. Python lunges at you again. There is only one thing left you can do.

“*Python . . .*” Your lips split as your heavy tongue pushes the word out past your teeth. A breeze rushes against your skin, and it smells like summer: pine trees, the acrid stench of sweat, and metal polish. Python jerks to a stop an inch from your face. Beady black eyes lock onto you, like it promises to remember your face. Its body freezes, as still as stone. Your dizzy head splits the image into an ever shifting number of copies as Python begins to crumble away into gold dust. Something inside you relaxes a little bit, and the world blinks one more time, before canting sideways. You catch the faint smell of sulfur, as the top of the tree disappears from view and your body goes limp.

*I really am going to die.*

*I hope someone heard me.*

*Please, father, if you’re out there somewhere, please let someone have heard me.*

“*Will!*” Something snags the side strap of your armor, and you snap to a stop, bruised against the metal plates, as your body tries to keep falling. You blink out again, and you’re not sure for how long. Something presses hard against your back, and that is when you realize you had passed out again. It takes a moment, but when your eyes flicker open, all you see is a cluster of branches above you. There’s no Python or cloud of gold dust. Maybe it was all a dream.

Nico sticks his face into your field of view, blocking out the little bit of light that filters down through the trees. He’s pale, sweating and shaking, and *am I dead?* The tiny flecks of light that catch inside of his dark curls almost make a halo around his head. If you could connect the dots, perhaps you could give him a crown, or a laurel. No not a laurel. Not a laurel.

“*Will?*” His voice is thin and frail. His face is contorted with no small amount of fear. Your hand
reaches up to cup his cheek. He’s so cold. Why is Nico so cold? “Will, please say anything. Please. I need to know that you’re alright.”

You can’t be dead. If this was the underworld Nico wouldn’t be looking so scared. He’d look blank, or maybe he’d be mad at you for dying. There wouldn’t be trees. There are rivers and valleys and a hundred thousand tunnels in the underworld, but there are no trees. Nico told you that. There are no trees, and if you were dead, you wouldn’t go to ‘heaven’ and Nico wouldn’t be a real angel. You’d go for judgment, maybe get Elysium, and maybe you’d catch sight of Nico out of the corner of your eye as your memories of the living world slipped away.

That means the Nico above you, the one that swallows as you trace a finger over the sharp jut of his cheekbone is real. The dark bloom of his brown eyes are real, the tangle of his hair is real, the feel of his skin is real. This is real. You’re alive. You’re alive. You survived. You did it.

“I think I’m afraid of snakes now,” you say. Instead of snark, or a snooty comment, all you get in return is a faint laugh. His head falls down against your armor with a dull clang.

You swear you hear him whisper, “Thank the gods.”

“I don’t know about the gods, but right now I’m really thankful to you,” you say, half laughing and half wincing as you try to sit up. Nico picks himself up off your chest, and you can see his relief wash away, replaced with anger. Oh that’s right, he was yelling at you before the whole Python thing. Well he doesn’t seem too mad, he even helps you sit up.

Then he promptly slaps you. Oh nope, he is definitely mad.

“What the actual fuck Will? Seriously, what the fuck.” Nico grabs your shoulders and shakes you a few times. “Why didn’t you just climb down when I told you too? You nearly died, you asshole!”

“Ow, ow, ow, ah, I’m sorry. Nico please stop.” You try to pry his hands off your shoulder, but the second you touch him, he snatches his hands back like he was burned.

“Are you hurt?” Nico asks.

“A little. I got a concussion earlier, and I’m definitely bruised from when you caught me, but I don’t think anything’s broken.”

“Oh, sorry.” Nico twists his hands in his lap, which, now that you think about it, is almost your lap too. The two of you are practically tangled together on the branch, his knees tucked underneath him, and your legs dangling over the side. It must’ve happened when Nico pulled you up.

“I’ll be fine. I would have been much worse if you hadn’t caught me.” You laugh a little, which predictably hurts. There’s a dull stinging in the back of your head, but you’re a little too afraid to reach back and prod at it. If it comes away with blood, you’re pretty sure you might actually pass out again.

“GUYS!” Jason appears almost right next to you, shouting so loud that you’re scared right out of your skin. You backpedal; hands slipping on the branch below you, until you’re sliding off the side, about to plummet to your doom for the third time that day. For one heart sickening second, the world around you begins to fall away, and your stomach drops out. But you’re not alone this time. Nico throws his arms around your waist before you can slip away from him, and together the two of you fall. A tree branch nicks your cheek, then everything around you dissolves into an inky blackness.

The darkness is not monolithic, not like when you close your eyes. You can feel it churning and you can almost see the way different shadows meld and separate. It’s like watching the surface of a pool
from underneath. There’s a whistling in your ears, and your skin pricks with a chill that’s too poignant to be summer air rushing around you.

Light flashes bright and hot in your eyes, blasting away with the darkness. A split second later your back thumps into the ground hard, but not hard enough to break anything. Nico lands on top of you, his arms still synched around your middle. He’s heavy enough to knock the air out of your lungs, but all you can think is: *his hands, I landed on his hands.*

“Nico!” Piper and Percy rush over, and lift Nico off of you, thank the gods. He waves them off, so he can use his hands fine. Good, okay he’s fine.

Now you can focus on yourself. You couldn’t breathe with his body pressing down on yours, let alone think. Too many things are happening too quickly, and your brain is throwing a fit trying to keep up. After a while, your eyes make sense of the forest around you, and the lookout tree towering far, far, above. A few branches come crashing to the ground near the base, about ten feet away. You can see them fall; hear them crash.

Ground. You’re back on the ground. Nico must have shadow traveled you. It would piss you off a little, but he did just save your life. Your body aches as you push yourself into a sitting position and take a look around. Annabeth and Chiron are keeping the other campers back to give you some space, which is well appreciated right now.

“Will, Nico!” Jason touches down nearby. His face is scrunched and pale, reflecting his mingling panic and guilt. Serves the asshole right for scaring you out of the tree, you could have died.

“Will? Will!” Lou and Cecil have pushed their way to the front, where they are now locked in a heated argument with Annabeth and Chiron. You can’t quite make out words, but you get the general gist. Either Annabeth and Chiron are going to let them through, or Lou and Cecil will force their way through. Knowing that your friends would fight just about anything to protect you warms your heart, and makes you deeply worried for their sense of self preservation. You wish Chiron and Annabeth would let them through, though. Instead Jason comes up to you.

“Are you alright?” Since there’s no one kneeling and fussing over you, Jason sits by your side, though he looks thoroughly awkward and uncomfortable about it first.

“I’m not dead, but for future references, after someone experiences a life threatening event, jump scaring them is not a good idea.” Your arms are shaking a little where they prop you up, as the adrenalin fades from your body.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I was calling out to Nico when I saw him shadow travel and grab you out of the air. I thought you guys knew I was there, I’m so sorry.” His fingers ghost over the side of his head. There’s no grove in his hair anymore, so it looks like you were right, the gesture is a nervous habit.

“That’s not your fault. Python makes things silent. I think he was hoping I wouldn’t see him coming, and he could kill me before I got a chance to speak.” Your voice is a little scratchy and thin, but you’re thankful it doesn’t crack.

“Python?” He furrows his brow in a very serious face, which frankly looks kind of silly because his eyebrows are so pale it’s like they’re not even there.

“Later. Help me to my feet.” You put your arms out like a child. Jason blinks before slinging an arm under your shoulder. As he lifts you up, something in your back cracks, and hurts like a bitch.
“Are you sure you should be standing?” Jason keeps his arm under your shoulder, like he thinks you’ll fall over without him. You find this annoying, but also much appreciated. You would most certainly fall over without his help, but you hate that he knows that.

“Who’s the doctor here?” you shoot back, although there is a clear and present strain to your voice that undermines your mature medical expertise.

“Maybe I should have Chiron check on you?” Jason offers, which gives you a brilliant idea.

“Sure thing, I’ll call him. Chiron!” you call out, and for a moment Chiron turns away from Lou and Cecil. They dart around him, rushing you and Jason. Cecil practically tosses the ex-praetor away as Lou undoes the fastenings on your armor.

“Did something try to kill you?” Cecil asks.

“Yep.” You grimace as Lou peels away the chest plate and leather straps, but having that weight off your shoulders helps you breathe a little easier.

“Did you kill it?” Lou asks, her fingers going white knuckled around your breastplate.

“Sort of?” There’s a single fact that’s been niggling at the back of your brain since Python disappeared. Python was your father’s nemesis, and you’re a demigod. There’s no way in Hades it’s going to be that easy. Maybe you’re safe for now, but that’s not going to stop this thing forever.

“Close enough!” Cecil grins, proud and slick and pure trouble. Then he turns his head away and shouts at the crowd. “Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

Chapter End Notes

I’m a slut for Drew Tanaka redemption arc. Honestly “she’s a bitch, but she’s our bitch” is like my favorite trope. Like, I love selfish girls, who are blunt and self-assured, but are also super loyal to their friends. Heal your insecurity, and learn to open your heart Drew. Anyway, that’s like such a sub-plot. It’s like a sub-plot’s sub-plot. Back to the real plot talk. Yeah it’s Python, which is not original, but I think I put a pretty good spin on the myth. Stick around, yeah?

I'm taking a lot of reading and writing intensive classes this semester at college so I'm not sure when the next time I'll be able to update is, but I'll do my best!
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Surprise bitch, bet you thought you'd seen the last of me.
(In all seriously though, thank you for your patience. I had a horrific semester at college.
If any of you are undergrads, please love yourselves, and don't try to take 20+ hours of
class while also working 20 hours a week. Just don't. Pick one or the other.)

Anyway, someone last commented that maybe Nico and Will should kiss, and I was
like, great idea, but what if instead I try to kill them? So please enjoy this chapter. It's the
longest thus far. Also has the most dick jokes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Even before you open your eyes you know there’s something wrong. The light that presses against
your eyelids is yellowed, electric. Your throat feels dry; your lips sticky. You’re thirsty, but not
dehydrated. Softness tickles your skin, but it’s a softness that rests heavy over your body, and you
find this heaviness comforting. The air smells empty, clean in a way that banishes even the smell of
heat.

This is comfortable, but that’s precisely the problem.

Weren’t you just in a war zone? Weren’t you just in a forest? How . . .

Something tickles your forehead, soft and feathery.

Your eyes snap open so fast that you startle the face looking down at you. They go tumbling back
into a chair, and medical cart, knocking both to the ground.

There’s a knit quilt over your body in addition to the thin cotton hospital blankets that are still tightly
tucked into the bedside. You recognize the quilt; it belongs to Ren, one of your little sisters. The rest
of the room is empty, save for . . . Lou, who was the one that tumbled back into all of that
equipment. It takes a little maneuvering but you eventually kick out of your medically mandated
blanket burrito. Along the way, you discover that your body aches, but most of the pain is localized
on your right side and the back of your head. You vaguely remember falling out of the same tree like
three or four times, and upon lifting the flimsy greenish material of your hospital gown, you find that
your midsection is all wrapped up. There’s a little bit of red leaking through the wrapping. Oh,
you’re bleeding.

Maybe the blood should have been the thing that struck you as distinctly wrong, but even as you
remember where you are, and how you probably ended up in the infirmary (fainting?), you can’t
seem to settle. Something is wrong, it’s like the smell of sulfur in the air before lightning strikes, or
the ocean receding before a tsunami.

Lou groans from the floor.

“Ow!” she cries, glaring at you from the mess of medical equipment and chair legs like the fact that
she tripped and fell is entirely you fault.

“Well, that’s what you get for being creepy,” you say. Your eyes cast around the infirmary for something to explain the harried way your heart beats. There’s an unquiet discord in your body, and for years your teachers had told you that it was a flaw, a thing to be medicated and trained out, but you know better. It’s your battle instinct and it’s got you wired to look closer, think harder.

Lou looks at you with her big green eyes like she can see right through you, or rather, like she can see beneath your skin, straight to the bubbling inconsolable magic and unnamed stuff that constitutes the better parts of your soul, and half your blood: your humanity.

“So you can feel it now too,” she says, after a while. Scattered among the fallen metal things, hair ruffled, clothes rumpled, Lou Ellen should look like a silly, clumsy, child. But her level gaze and the soft and steady cadence of her voice seems almost prophetic. You remember her falling back against the grass last summer, sunlight splitting between her fingers as she reached up towards the sun. She had told you something then, and you had dismissed it out of hand. After all, you had just won the battle.

“Is this-”

“The air feels thick. There’s someone in it,” she says.

Maybe you had been a little too keen on the idea that you’d won the war too. And maybe, you’d been a little too reliant on your father, thinking that if something were wrong he’d give someone a prophecy. Gods above, you think you should have known, you should have-

“That’s good though,” Lou says, cutting off your thoughts, “now we can fight it.”

A Cheshire smile lights her lips, and gods above are you glad she’s a lot braver than you.

The infirmary door creeks open a few inches, and Cecil sticks his head in. He takes one look at you in your stupid hospital gown and snickers.

“Put some pants on you heathen,” he throws the door open and marches in, now that he’s assured you’re not asleep. He forgets to close it; of course he forgets to close it. It never occurs to him that you might not want the entire world seeing you in your underwear at this particular moment. Besides, it’s not like you can just march down to your cabin and grab some pants.

At your annoyed look, Cecil points over to the corner where your duffle bag is still sitting, and . . . Holy motherfucking shit. It’s only been a day since you got to camp.

“Come on man, there’s a council of cabin leaders that need your testimony, and I know your thighs are fantastic, not going to lie, but they’d probably get Nico thinking about the wrong kind of python, if you know what I -oof!”

Your duffle bag knocks him square in the chest, because yes, you do know exactly what he means and now is not the time for that. Cecil bends over and wheezes a bit.

“Dude, what did you pack, bricks?”

“Med textbooks.”

Cecil collapses to the floor in an overdramatic pile of spaghetti limbs. Has he gotten taller? You swear he has, if he were to stand up now, you’re sure he would have at least an inch on you. You suppose it's been months since you've really looked at him.
“Oh the irony, I’ve been killed by medical books!” He puts his hand to his forehead and then proceeds to lie still for as long as it is possible for Cecil to lie still, which is like, maybe thirty seconds. Seriously you don’t even have your pants on before he’s back at it again. This time, however, Lou joins him, and between the two of them, they quite literally exhaust every possible dick-python related situational joke ever.

“Are you guys seriously making dick jokes out of this? People have died,” you snap, once you have your pants on.

“I’m a Hermes kid, mourning people by making jokes about it is what we do. You know who invented the meme? Hermes.” Cecil says this like he is proud of it.

“And I’m hilarious, so . . .” She shrugs. She was also raised by the Hermes cabin, and so you give her a pass.

You push your way past the two of them and head to the war council room. When you get there, all of the other counselors sit up straight, dropping their books, or games, or conversations, or whatever else they were doing before you came in. Empty bags of popcorn and snack bowls litter the table. The tray that has sliced veggies on it is still mostly full. As much as Chiron tries to encourage healthy eating, celery is not the first thing anyone reaches for after a near death experience.

Speaking of the devil; he greets you at the door.

“Will, how are you feeling?” Chiron asks.

“Is my family safe?” The words spring from your lips when you realize that none of your siblings are here. You don’t really know why you were expecting to see them here, but their absence makes you uneasy. Who’s looking after them when you’re not there?

“Of course they are, I sent them back to your cabin,” Chiron says, guiding you towards the Ping-Pong table so you can take a seat. His words are strangely reassuring, or rather . . . they’re as reassuring as they had always been. It has just been so long since you were able to feel reassured that you had forgotten how easy it was to trust people.

“Okay then, I guess there’s no use talking around it. Python is awake.” The name casts a chill over the room, but you’ll keep saying Python until Python is dead and gone, or sent back to wherever the fuck it is monsters go to wait. Most of the counselors brought their seconds, and Malcolm shifts forward in that puffed up way of his that lets everyone know he’s about to speak.

“Are you sure-”

“Malcolm look at my face, no, look at me. Does this face look unsure to you? Look at my body, does this look fake to you?” You lift up your shirt so everyone can see the bandages, red stains and all. Malcolm curls away from you with a red flush of shame shooting up the back of his neck.

“What Malcolm means to ask is how you’re sure the snake was actually Python, and not some sort of lesser monster related to Python?” Annabeth looks skeptical, her lips pinched downward ever so slightly.

“Because when I screamed it’s name, the thing froze and it crumpled into dust, like sulfur dust, monster dust!” Your voice is starting to get a little too loud for the room. Thick oak walls absorb most sounds in here, but when no one else is speaking, you sound as if you are shouting. You remember, a little too late to save your dignity that Annabeth has seen this all before. She probably knows it can’t be this easy to beat a monster like Python. “Look, I know it can’t be this easy, and
maybe that was just one iteration, like it’s not banished for good, but I know what I saw.”

“Nico, did you see it?” Annabeth directs further inquires away from you. You think it’s to give you space, but you’re not sure.

“No, but I didn’t have to. He looked like you right after you fought Arachne,” Nico says, and that’s enough for Annabeth to back off. She gives you a look though, like she’s trying to find some vestige of her own scars on your face. You don’t know if she finds it but she looks away. If only the others could be as convinced.

“What does that even look like?” Clarisse mutters, and her brother snickers.

“Like Chris fresh out of the Labyrinth,” Nico snaps back, and Clarisse whips her head around to stare him down. Nico doesn’t flinch, but you can see Clarisse’s hand twitch for a weapon that’s not there.

“Um, not to interrupt anything, but what is Python?” Jason ventures, smiling tight and nervous. Right. Roman. Okay.

“Python was my father’s ancient enemy, a child of Gaia. After the war with the Giants and Titans was over, my father went to Delphi, where Python controlled the Oracle for Gaia. He slew Python, and so the Oracle became his.” Jason nods slowly, and you relax back into your chair.

“But if Apollo is missing . . . Who can kill Python?” Katie Gardiner asks. Her voice is small, and a little strained.

“Apollo,” you say. “We just have to find him.”

“I agree,” Chiron says and as always that’s the final word on the subject. “I think it’s time we put together a quest.”

“How exactly are we going to find him though?” Percy asks. He does not look happy about this, but you know that Percy probably hates the sound of the world ‘quest’ at this point in his life.

“Actually, I think I can find him.” For the first time that meeting Rachel Dare stands up from the back of the room. This is news to you. You sit forward in your chair and she catches your eye before turning to address the rest of the counselors.

“I’ve been talking with Austin, trying to work out my prophetic vision. It’s not great, mostly just sketches of stuff, but . . . Well I’m not any worse than before I took the oracle.” She stands up straight and looks around the room. Percy wrinkles his face in thought, and then asks,

“So you know where he is?”

“No, but . . . I have pieces, and I know we need to go west. I can feel him somewhere out there,” she says. Rachel stands a little taller, like explaining things makes her more sure of them herself. You wonder if maybe they’ll bring your father to camp after they find him. A little corner of your mind starts threading together possibilities where you might meet him. This is all just a dream to you though, you’ve long given up believing that you’ll really meet him.

“In addition, it is my personal belief that Rachel’s visions will get stronger the closer to the source she gets. Therefore, two demigods should accompany Rachel, making a team of three.” Chiron rolls his shoulders back as Clarisse, Jason, Percy, Annabeth and Piper all look between themselves. It’s clear that Annabeth would be one of the better choices. She’s resourceful, and one of the most experienced out there. Your next bet would be Percy, because he’s the second most experienced and
is a perfect team with Annabeth, but then again Jason can fly, and if there’s ever a situation where they need to move Rachel to a safer place, he’d be the go-to guy. You don’t know enough about Piper’s combat skills to draw conclusions, but if they’re looking for Apollo charm speaking can’t hurt. Clarisse fights well enough for a battalion, and she’s probably the best suited for a long-term campaign. If they don’t know where Apollo is, looking could take weeks.

“Is there anyone in particular you feel should accompany you on the quest?” Chiron asks. Rachel doesn’t hesitate a second.

“Will.”

There’s a bit of quiet discussion before everyone nods their heads. You start to nod along too, because yeah, of course she’d choose . . .

“Wait, what?” The words spring haplessly out of your mouth, as you try to replay what she said again. “Why?”

“I’ve got a feeling. And besides, I’m better with my prophecies when I’m around Apollo kids. You’re like little signal boosters.” She nods at you in what she probably thinks is a very comforting gesture, but you only find it mildly confusing. You’re still not sure you heard her right. Or maybe she’s confused. You’ve never been on a quest in your life and you’re middle grade at best when it comes to fighting.

“Are there any objections?” Chiron asks. He’s met with silence. “Alright, then. Will, if you would choose someone you think you might work well with by tomorrow, I’ll have Argus arrange one of the SUVs for you to leave first thing tomorrow morning.”

Chiron exits the room, and you sit there staring ahead for a little while. You’re going to go on a quest. You were chosen for a quest. You have never been chosen for anything in your life (aside from like, team based activities in PE but that’s only because you can run slightly faster than the average Jo, and come on. You weren’t even chosen first for those things, just slightly more towards the front).

“Congrats Will!” In the point five seconds since Chiron left the room Percy Jackson has leapt out of his chair, vaulted past Jason, and is now slapping you on the back with the biggest smile you’ve seen him wear in a long time.

“Yes, congratulations, Will,” Annabeth smiles and pats you on the back as well. One by one all of the older kids get up, pat you on the back with a big smile and then duck out of the room. By the time they’ve all exited and you realize what’s happening, there’s hardly anyone left in the room.

“Did they just dodge being the third member of the quest?” You rub at your sore shoulder, because ow. Those guys are all crazy strong.

“Studding deduction, Sherlock,” Malcolm gripes from his spot at the table. The only remaining demigods are ones who are both qualified, and actually want to go on a quest with no clear end goal and an invisible monster that shadow travels haunting you, which leaves incredibly thin pickings. Then you realize that this is all very stupid, because you know who you want to go on a quest with you.

“Malcolm do you actually think I would choose you to come with me. Like that’s actually something I want, to have to spend weeks in constant contact with you,” you ask.

Malcolm grimaces.
“I don’t actually, but since Annabeth is leaving after this summer, I kind of need the quest experience. I figured it couldn’t hurt to at least look like I was making an effort,” he says.

“I actually hate you.”

“Duly noted.”

“Will, focus. Since we’re all here, you should pick someone,” Nico gripes. You frown at him.

“I am focused. Shit talking takes a lot of focus.”

“You’re an actual child.”

“That’s rich coming from you Death Boy. Besides I’ve already made my choice.” At first when you say this, it’s just to be a petulant little asshole, but now that the words are leaving your lips, you realize it’s true. There’s really only one person you think is right for this job.

“Already?” He looks like he thinks you might still have a serious concussion.

“What, like it’s hard?” You vaguely wish the twins were here to appreciate your sick Legally Blond reference.

“Will, this is literally a life or death decision.” Thankfully Nico doesn’t seem to pick up on the reference, you think he would definitely be really pissed if you were quoting it at a time like this.

“I know.”

“You do realize that if you picked wrong, you could die.”

“I know.” Your certainty leaves him momentarily stunned, and a little curious.

“Who did you pick?” he asks. You don’t even hesitate.

“You.”

The room is quiet for a few minutes. Then Malcolm shoves himself away from the Ping-Pong table with a sigh.

“Well, looks like it’s time to go.” The others stragglers file out. Before he goes, Butch looks over his shoulder and gives you a thumbs up. You never thought you’d be looking for Butch to validate your live choices, but now that he is, you’re strangely touched. Nico stares at you, a little red in the face.

“Why?” He seems genuinely confused, so you look down at your fingers and start to count off the reasons.

“You’re absolutely terrifying in a fight. You’re used to being on your own, so traveling won’t be hard on you. You think fast, and you know a lot about monsters. You’ve been on quests before. You’re really hard to kill.”

“What?” There’s a mixture of pride and offense on his face that you think summarizes Nico as a person pretty well.

“I mean listen, how many people do you know who have actually been to Tartarus and then spent like a week in a jar. I think at this point, you’re officially hard to kill.” You really don’t get why this is a surprise, because come on. Nico purses his lips and then nods.
“That’s fair.”

“Anyway, I also just like being around you, and you kind of know Rachel, cause she was in the
Labyrinth with you for a while, so spending a lot of time with you will be fine,” you say.

Nico sets his jaw in a tight frown for a second and looks off to the side like maybe there’s something
prophetic written on the walls. Then he sighs, and gives you a humorless smile.

“Okay. Sure. Let’s go find Python.”

...

When you return to your home everyone is quiet. The beds and dressers have all been pushed to the
sides of the room, and your family sits together in a mourning circle in the center.

“For Birdy,” Kyla says quietly.

“You haven’t . . . ?”

“We burned his shroud so his ghost is at rest, but for the mourning . . . We waited for you.”

You don’t say another word; just join them in the center of your cabin. Still, you can’t help but feel
they’re mourning you too. After all, when was the last time an Apollo counselor lived to graduate?

...

Dawn bleeds a hazy red and orange over a grey sky, conscious of the somber mood in your cabin.
The youngest had been put to sleep hours ago, but Kyla, and the twins, and Chloe and Austin all
wait up with you, as you finish writing Birdy’s page in the Book. Victoria made a valiant effort, but
she drifted off to sleep about an hour ago.

Once you’ve placed the last period on the page, Austin takes the chapter, and adds it to the long list
of family you used to know. Lee, Nino, and Lola, and Poppy, Oscar, Isaac, Zack and Yabin, and
then Michael.

“Will, can I talk to you?” Chloe pulls you aside quietly and the two of you trek out into the summer
air, hot and heavy without a breeze. Chloe fidgets for a second before she proffers her bow.

“Wha-”

“It was Michael’s and now it should be yours.” She says all this very quickly, as if she might change
her mind if given the chance. Still, you give her the chance. You are quiet.

Then you say, “Chloe,” and you know she knows what you mean. Michael was the best archer.
When only his bow was all that was left, it went to the next best archer, as it should have.

“No,” she insists, and her hands shake as he holds the bow out to you, but her arms are locked
straight. You nod slowly, carefully, and take it.
“The twins have sonic arrows for you. And Austin put together some stuff for you to read. I’m sure Kyla has something to say.” She shifts in her spot, for a moment before making a b-line back into your cabin. After she is gone, you run your finger over the length of the bow, and it folds itself down into a little package that looks something like an umbrella but without the canvas covering. It’s so small in your hand.

You sit out on the steps for a while, watching the sky shift from red to grey. Kyla comes out after a few minutes with the duffle bag someone retrieved from the Big House, and your backpack.

“I packed everyone’s gifts into your backpack,” she says, setting them beside you. You slip Michael’s bow into one of the outside pockets.

“Thanks,” you say, and she shrugs, sits down next to you, and consciously does not speak. After a while she sets her head on your shoulder, and lets out a little sob. “Kyla-”

“I packed you my lyre.”

Your mind grinds to a halt as she shifts up and opens your backpack.

“Austin packed you things you should read, to figure out where the real Python, or the rest of Python, or whatever, might be or how to kill it.” She sits up a bit and clears her throat.

“Kyla-”

“I know none of this makes sense, but it’ll be okay.” Tears dribble down her cheeks as quickly as she wipes them away. You nod, and then it’s your turn to rest your head against her shoulder.

“What am I going to do with Orpheus’ lyre?” You ask quietly, and she shrugs, jostling you a bit.

“‘Dunno. . . But I figured it can’t hurt.” She swallows back another little sob, and you know what she’s not saying. You know that not a single child from Apollo cabin has graduated in years.

“I’m coming back,” you say.

“Please?” she asks, like it’s the only thing she’ll ever ask of you again. Then she straightens and wipes away her tears in earnest. “I can’t let the little ones see me like this. The last thing you need is Milo and Nissa bursting into waterworks. Actually, you had better go before they wake up.”

“They’ll definitely cry if they don’t get to say goodbye,” you say with a little smile.

“Let me worry about that. You’ve got to go find Dad.” She returns your smile, and punches your shoulder lightly.

You part ways on the steps, and head off towards the Big House where a big black SUV is waiting to take you away. It’s one of those spare ones that got left after Camp Jupiter headed back home as some sort of weird, super aggressive, peace offering. Anyway, it works for you. Without a clear idea of where you’re going, it’s not like you could just hop on a train or take the bus. Besides, the only way to really get out west is by car, and you’ve got a license.

Lou Ellen and Cecil join you on your walk. You can’t really remember greeting them, but one second you’re alone, and the next one is on either side of you, like an honor guard.

None of you say anything, just walk. Before you head to the car, you take a slight detour and put your duffle bag in the Big House. It’ll be better to pack lightly, and so you shove a few changes of clothes into the last free corners of your backpack. Then you all head back out. Once you reach the
car, Cecil stops dead in his tracks.

“I’ve never been outside of Manhattan,” he says.

“It’s not great,” Lou Ellen replies, crossing her arms over her chest. It’s been a few years since she last went home though. It’s been exactly as many years as she’s known she liked girls.

“I’ve only ever known California and New York, so all of that in-between stuff will be new to me.” They both nod, and it’s quite again. Cecil takes in a deep breath.

“Listen I know you’re kind of fond of that piece of shit sword you’ve had since we were like, ten, but you can’t just carry that around in the real world, because laws, so take this.” His words all come out in a jumbled mess, as he shoves a switchblade into your hand. You press the little switch that releases the blade, and out shoots a tiny celestial bronze dagger.

“Switch blades are also illegal, you know?” You really hope Cecil knows that. Sometimes you worry that growing up in camp has made him a menace to society.

“But you can hide this better than that sword,” He gestures to your side, and you willingly acquiesce the old thing. You don’t tell him that you’ve had it since Lou was claimed, since he nearly died. It’s terribly sentimental of you to keep a shitty training sword all this time, but that was the last real battle you fought with a sword. Now you don’t feel bad giving it up though. You defended your friend’s life with that thing, and now you’ll defend your life with your friend’s thing. It works.

“It’s a little small.” You would almost laugh if wasn’t very apparent that this was a big deal to Cecil. He rolls his eyes at you.

“Tap the bottom.”

You do, and in your palm, the grip shifts, growing larger. In a second it’s a full-blown celestial bronze sword, lighter than the usual you train with, which actually suits you better.

“Tap the bottom again and it’ll go back to being a switchblade.” This works perfectly well, but then you are left with another problem. You stare at the switchblade and fiddle the handle a little bit more before you finally relent.

“Okay, but how do I get the regular switchblade to come back in?”

Cecil groans and rolls his eyes, like he cannot believe there is anyone out there who does not know how to work a switchblade. This is the same look he gave you when you were eight and you told him you didn’t know how to pick a lock.

“Oh my gods, here let me-” He reaches for your switchblade, but you shy away.

“No I-”

“Let me-”

“Just tell me-”

“Would you-”

“Boys!” Lou Ellen cuts in, but there’s a smile on her lips and after a second she snorts a laugh. “You’re fighting over a switchblade, come on. You’ll both get yourselves killed, and where’ll that leave us?”
You both settle down and smile at each other, at little. He points to the switch on the handle, and you flick it back. The blade retreats.

“Thanks,” you say, shoving it into your back pocket. He shrugs and rubs the back of his neck.

“It’d kind of suck if you died,” he says. Lou Ellen laughs again, which gets a glare from Cecil. Then she throws her arms around you and smushes her face against your chest.

“I also think it’d suck if you died.” Though she was laughing just a second ago, she’s shaking a little bit now. You wrap your arms around her and smush your face against the top of her head.

“I think it’d suck too,” you murmur. Cecil sort of drapes himself over the top of your hug so that you all become a standing cuddle pile. The birds begin to stir from their nightly slumber, and sing as the dreary morning dampness starts to dissolve. Cecil flops off of your cuddle pile and shoves his hands into his pockets.

“It’s weird that you’ll be gone on a quest. I’ve never thought of you as the hero type, you’ve always been more of a doctor, you know?” Cecil says. You nod. This is all weird for you too, but if anyone has a right to find your father, it’d be you. He’s been dodging you for nearly seventeen years of your life, it’s about damn time you saw him.

“Oh, Will, before I forget I have a lucky charm for you. Or at least I think it’s lucky. It’s probably lucky.” She sticks her fingers into the neck of her shirt and tugs up a thin leather strap from around her neck. Lou Ellen is the last person you would expect to wear jewelry, but she pulls a necklace over her head and hands it out to you.

There is nothing particularly spectacular about it. The pendant hanging from the end is a gold coin with a sun stamped into the center on both sides. However years as a demigod have taught you that the most unassuming things are usually the most dangerous.

“When you said it was probably lucky?”

“It belonged to Medea.”

You jump and almost throw the necklace away from you, but at the last second your fingers won’t release. This was a gift from Lou and as much as this necklace might kill you, you’ll try to be grateful for it. It’s a little late though, Lou can see just how distressed you are.

“I don’t think it’s magic, it was a gift from her father, who got it from his father, Helios.” Lou rubs a nervous hand up and down her bicep. “I don’t know, I was looking through Hecate cabin’s old stuff for something to give you, but most of that stuff is magic and you might hurt yourself if you don’t know how to use it, and this just kind of reminded me of you, with the sun god and all . . .”

“It’s great!” You hastily slip it on over your head. Even through your camp shirt, the medallion feels strangely warm. “It looks great, I’m sure it’s lucky, I mean Medea made it out of her myth, and was happily married a second time to a perfectly nice mortal, how often does that happen to women in myths?”

Lou smiles, but you’re not sure whether it’s because she’s actually reassured or because she finds your rambling funny. Maybe it was because you had both descended into stupid ramblings, a little too nervous to just say thank you. Maybe it was because just this one time, thank you also meant goodbye.

“We’ll see you when you get back.” Cecil says, skirting around his goodbye as well. That’s all right, you can’t say it either.
“Yeah, oh Lou, look after Kyla for me, will you? Don’t let her think herself into a funk.” Lou Ellen nods, and after one last group hug they depart, back to their cabins, and back to their days. It strikes you as strange, knowing that today is craft day. Apollo, Hermes and Hecate cabin will all sit down with glitter and popsicle sticks and blow torches and make pretty, useless items that will end up shoved in a trunk somewhere back in their cabins.

You start as the back door to the SUV slides open. Rachel sticks her curly red head out of the opening

“Are they gone?” She looks around, and once she has determined that your friends have in fact left, she climbs out and slides the door shut behind her.

“Were you sitting in there listening to us talk the whole time?” Your face heats up a little bit, after realizing she was listening to you all exchange your emotionally stunted goodbyes.

“I was putting my stuff away when you guys showed up, and you looked like you were having a moment so I didn’t want to interrupt.” Rachel puts her hands on her hips and frowns at you, like your outrage is unreasonable.

“Okay, I guess, thanks.” You’re still a little embarrassed. Rachel snorts a little laugh at you.

“You all were adorable,” she says, in that big sisterly way that is equal parts condescending and affectionate. You just make an embarrassed and agitated noise at her, before slinging your backpack over your shoulder and moving to get into the car.

She eyes your backpack and then frowns, “Will, where is all of your clothing?”

“In my backpack.” You gesture at it with your free hand like you’re Vanna White. Rachel is unimpressed.

“We’re going to be gone for a while. Probably more than a week or two,” she says and you try not to roll your eyes.

“I already packed.” This is ridiculous. You intentionally packed lightly. You’ll be fine.

“You need more than one shirt, William.”

“I have more than one shirt!”

“You need more than two shirts, William.”

You make a frustrated noise and stomp into the big house to retrieve your duffle. Upon your return you yank open the SUV door and toss your bag inside before turning back to Rachel.

“Happy?”

Rachel looks you over once again.

“Did you bring close toed shoes?”

“Oh my fucking gods, Rachel.”

“Will, you can’t fight evil without close toed shoes.”

“Fight me!” It’s the best defense you can come up bit, but Rachel is unflappable.
“Bring it on, you noodle.”

“I am not a noodle, I am decently muscled. I can climb the fucking lava wall of death and carry wounded demigods from the heat of battle.” You flex your arm emphasizing your point, and while you’re no Ares kid, it has been proven that you are hot enough to be a distraction. Rachel still looks unimpressed.

“Okay, whatever you say, noodle.”

As a rational and responsible medical professional, you do the only reasonable thing. You screech in indignation and rip your shirt off. Rachel, in turn, screeches in shock and then tries to punch you in the stomach to test out your abs. You manage to flex at the last moment, which sufficiently prevents her fist from squishing your digestive track, but you end up making another distressed noise. Rachel makes a noise of impressed awe.

“Alright, what the fuck.” Nico drops his backpack by the car and you both jump. He glares at the two of you, waiting for an explanation.

“She started it?” you try, blushing down to your toes.

“I can’t believe I agreed to be stuck in a car with you,” he says, tugging open the door to the SUV and tossing his backpack inside. He crawls into the back and shuts the door behind him.

“Why didn’t you get on his case about not packing enough?” you ask Rachel as you shrug your t-shirt back on.

“You live in Beverly Hills. I know that you own enough things to fill more than one backpack. Him, I’m not so sure. Besides if you pack extra, he can borrow from you if he needs to.” She climbs into the passenger seat, and you stare after her for a few moments. You had never thought about why Nico always seemed to wear the same aviator jacket and jeans and combat boots. You just figured all of his clothes looked the same. Maybe they do all look the same. It would be easy for everything to look the same if everything you owned could fit inside a backpack.

You hop into the driver seat and do one last check to make sure you have everything important. Jason comes by to see Nico off. Nico climbs out of the car. They walk a little ways away and have what appears to be a very serious conversation. For a second Nico looks angry with Jason, but then they both take a few moments and Nico sighs. He says something else and Jason looks relieved. They part, and Nico trudges back to the car, wrenching open the back door and climbing into the very back.

“Everything okay?” you call, adjusting the mirror a little bit so you can see Nico’s face as he grumpily buckles his seatbelt. Oh that is just too cute.

“It’s fine. He just made me promise to be careful, which is stupid, because this is a quest.” Once Nico has adjusted his seatbelt to his satisfaction he turns to glare out the window. You try your best not to smile too much and start the car, easing it down the side of the hill towards the road.

“That’s true, but it’d suck if you died.” That seems to be the theme of your day so far.

“Thanks. I can tell you really care.” You can practically hear his eyes rolling. Rachel just side eyes you, and snorts a laugh before flicking on the radio.

...
“Oh my gods, Rachel, turn it up I love this song.”

“Hmm? . . . Oh yeah, oh my gods!”

“Talk to me baby!

“uuuuh, blah blah- Let’s loose our minds and go fucking crazy!”

“Oh ya ya ya ya ya.”

“Keep on hoping-”

“We’ll eat cake by the ocean!”

“Please stop.”

“What, you don’t like pop music?”

“I don’t mind the music, but your singing is terrible.”

“I bet can I find an oldies station.”

“Good idea Rachel, I love classic rock.”

“You two aren’t listening to me at all are you.”

... 

“Should I stay or should I go!”

“I’ll be here till the end of time!”

“So you’ve got to let me know!”

“Should I stay or should I go!”

“Oh my gods, stop.”

As if answering Nico’s prayers the radio begins to dissolve into static, and after a few seconds it goes out completely.

“Ah man,” Rachel fiddles with the dial but it seems like every station she comes across is baseball or country music.

“Check the glove compartment to see if maybe there’re some CDs,” you say. From the backseat Nico groans.

Rachel pops open the glove compartment but all she can find is a Complete Works of Schumann, which, fuck no. You chew on the inside of your mouth for a moment before you have an idea.

“Hey Nico, pass Rachel my backpack.” He tosses it up front and Rachel heaves it over the armrest.
“Check and see if Austin packed me any CDs.” She opens it up, and begins an intense whisper-conversation about your boxer briefs resting at the top where you haphazardly shoved them earlier.

(“Why are all of these superhero themed? Do you have a thing for super heroes?”)

(“Shut up!”)

(“Also, briefs?”)

(“I’m a pretty active guy, boxers don’t really hold everything in place. Besides, I need a little more support, you know?”)

(“Really?”)

(“Shhh!”)

(“What, I think Nico would be pretty interested in this.”)

“Pretty interested in what?” Nico pipes up. Rachel starts to speak but you slap a hand over her mouth before anything can come up.

“Nothing!” Your face is so red there’s no way he isn’t at least a little suspicious. Thankfully though Nico doesn’t press, and Rachel goes back to searching for a CD. She does indeed find a CD after a while, and lo and behold it’s a Hamilton CD.

“Dibs on Hamilton!” she shouts, and you make a distressed noise.

“How about we both share Hamilton, and you can have him on the duets?” You do your best to pout at her while also keeping your eyes on the road.

"Hm, fine."

“Why are you guys talking about one of the founding fathers?” Nico asks from the backseat. You and Rachel share a look. You sigh.

“Oh boy.”

. . .

“What the Hades is this, are they rapping? Why is this happening?”

“Shhh, this is the best part.”

“Will, I thought you said this was a musical?”

“It is, just listen Nico. I swear it’ll be good.”

. . .
“I am Alexander Hamilton, Hamilton, just you waaaaaaait! I am not throwing away my shot!” You belt out the last lines with a satisfaction that always comes with finishing the first act. Nico hasn’t complained about what a stupid idea this musical is since the third track, so you consider him successfully converted.

“Can we stop at the next place, I have to pee?” Rachel asks, and yeah, now that she mentions it, you kind of have to pee too. You’re passing through a little wooded area somewhere out in west Pennsylvania right now, so there’s nothing around really. You hold off on the heading into the second act of Hamilton for now, and focus on looking for side roads. After a little while you spot a turn off signal for a rest area and head that way.

It’s a pretty small rest area with two or three other trucks parked in its parking garage, but they’ve got working vending machines and the bathrooms are in decent shape, so you’re pretty satisfied. It’s nice to rest too. You wouldn’t think it, but driving always tires you out a little bit. It’s sort of like taking a long test.

You sit on one of the low-lying walls that bracket in a spindly little tree and a pitiful collection of flowers. There’s aren’t many people here, and while Rachel is in the bathroom most of the other cars pull out. A fat lady in a denim dress keeps giving you looks while her Chihuahua prances around a little patch of grass, looking for somewhere to pee. Maybe she thinks you’re some sort of unsavory character. That’s kind of funny, you’ve never been mistaken for a delinquent before. Nico comes and joins you, munching on a packet of trail mix.

“We should stop and get some real food,” he says. You nod, you could get behind that. The three of you have been driving for nearly five hours after all. Rachel emerges from the bathroom, looking more exhausted than when she went in.

“I had a premonition,” she declares. You nod.

“Great.”

“Now I need a nap.” Without further explanation she marches over to the SUV and climbs into the back. You take that as your cue to get up and get back to driving. Nico wads up his trail mix rapper and tosses it in one of the bins, but before he climbs into the passenger seat, he pauses, and looks at the woman in the jean dress. She looks right back. You lift your hand and wave. She smiles. Nico climbs in quickly, and buckles his seatbelt. You can see Rachel lying down on the back seats in your mirror.

“Put your seatbelt on,” you call. She groans, sits upright, and buckles before loosening it enough to lie back down.

“That woman . . .” Nico says, staring out at the woman in the jean dress, as you slowly pull out of your parking spot.

“Yeah?”

“She seems familiar.” He purses his lips. A slight chill runs down your spine, and you swallow.

“Like monster familiar or god familiar?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think I’ve actually seen her before, but I feel like . . .” He starts to bounce his leg, and then reaches into his boot to check that his knife is still there. As you pull off onto the road you pass by the woman in the jean dress. She waves to you, and you wave back, but just as you’re exiting you notice you don’t see her dog anymore.
“Huh,” you say as you ease onto the highway.

“What?” Nico asks.

“Oh it’s nothing, her Chihuahua ran off while she wasn’t looking.” You ease onto the highway road, bringing the car up to sixty. For a little while the car is quiet, then Nico begins to tap on the dash. Suddenly he goes very still.

“The Gateway Arch story,” he mutters. You’re about to ask what he’s talking about, when he whirls towards you.

“Will, stop the car!”

“Wha-”

Something big darts out into the just in front of you. You don’t even register what it is, just slam on the breaks and do your best to swerve. The car skids sideways, someone screams, probably Rachel, and out of the corner of your eye you see a red mane and teeth. A Chimera.

The car goes sliding into the monster, still moving at nearly sixty miles an hour, and is thrown into the air for just a second before it crashes back down and begins to roll.

Everything is black.

All you can hear is a continuous low drone in your ear.

Then slowly things come into focus, off to your right you hear the sound of a snake mixed with the scream of metal as the door is ripped away. You hang upside down, strapped into the driver’s seat by your seatbelt. The windshield is still mostly intact, and through it you can see the hissing head of a viper eyeing you. Your fingers fumble with your seatbelt, as beside you the Chimera roars. You only catch a flash of its teeth, but it jumps away from the car. Nico has already dropped out of his seat and rolls out the hole where the Chimera tore off the door.

You smell smoke and watch as a thick black cloud obscures the windshield. *Shit, shit, shit.* You command your fingers to function but they’re shaking, and your eyes don’t quite focus on the buckle, fading in and out. Head injury, right in times of stress head injuries often become symptomatic, and supernatural demigod healing skills or not, you’re still coming off the tail end of a concussion.

“Will!” Suddenly Rachel’s face is upside down in front of yours. Her hands reach to yours, unbuckle the seatbelt with ease, and catch you once you slip out of your seat. She helps you right yourself, and then makes for the hole that the Chimera left. Before you follow her, you scan the interior of the car, and yes, there it is. Your backpack didn’t move too much in the crash, so it’s easy for you to grab.

Rachel greets you off a little ways away from the car and glares when she sees what you stopped to grab.

“What were you thinking?” The car is still smoking, and you don’t know much about cars, but that’s probably really bad. If you are to believe Grand Theft Auto, it means the car is about to explode.

“That we’d be pretty fucked without nectar and ambrosia,” you mutter, snagging Michael’s bow from the backpack pocket, “and that I’m pretty fucking useless without a bow.”

She quiets after that, eyes trained to the car.
“Help Nico,” she says, and you don’t need to be told twice. A couple yards away the Chimera slowly circles him, spitting out big swathes of fire. He brandishes a knife . . . A knife?

You think, realize that his sword is probably still back in the car, that it wasn’t at his side when he was sitting next to you. As you snap open Michael’s bow with one hand, you feel into your back pocket with the other. Cecil’s knife is still there, you just have to get it to Nico.

The snake on the Chimera’s tail is still watching you, and you wonder if that means that the lion head can see you too. There’s one way to find out.

You dash across the road to the same side as Nico but a few meters away. You’re far enough away from Rachel that’s she’s probably as safe as she possibly could be. Something starts to drip down into your eye, but you wipe it away without thinking. Kneeling to steady your shaking body, you pull out one of the sonic arrows that your siblings packed you, and aim it at the flank of the Chimera.

“Cover your ears!” you shout at Nico. He does so without a moment’s hesitation, and you fire the arrow. The snake tail saw the arrow coming, and the body danced just out of reach, but that doesn’t matter. The sonic part still goes off, disorientating the monster for a few precious seconds.

“Nico catch!” You reach into your pocket and throw him the switchblade. He shoves his knife back into his boot and catches yours. He stares it for a moment, then flicks the blade out before the turning to give you a look that says, what the fuck?

There’s not enough time to explain as the Chimera recovers and charges Nico. Its lion mouth nearly closes around him, but one boot shoves the bottom jaw open, while he drives the knife with both hands into the roof of its mouth to keep the massive maw open. Still the Chimera tries to close this mouth, shaking its head to try and dislodge Nico.

“Tap the bottom!” you scream, and Nico manages to get his hand to the hilt after a moment. The knife expands, you can see it rising through the mouth of the Chimera. The Chimera jumps back and starts to shake its head and scream. Nico’s thrown out of its mouth but uses the momentum to roll and get himself to the other side of the road. He watches as it tries to paw the sword from its mouth, catching his breath. You draw a regular arrow, fit it into the string of your bow, and land a solid shot to its side while it’s distracted.

Nico looks over to you then, and his eyes go wide. His mouth forms around a word, but before you can hear it something yanks you up and back. Your legs dangle above the ground, and a few sharp points dig into your neck as something whispers, “Nice try, William Solace.”

Nico pales, and lunges towards you, but the Chimera manages to dislodge the sword from its face and pounces on him before he can get very far.

“Nico!” You drop your bow and try to struggle out of scaly reptilian arm holding you against a thick body, but the monster just presses the tips of its claws harder against your throat.

“Why don’t I offer you a deal, Nico di Angelo?,” the monster behind you says with an almost sickly sweet voice, “if you stop resisting, my son can kill you first and quickly, so you don’t have to see your friends suffer. Oh and don’t worry, a death by my hands shall always be a heroic death, for I am Echidna.”

On the ground before you, Nico wriggles just a little and from the earth around the Chimera four armored skeleton rise. The Chimera rounds on them and begins to breathe fire, though it doesn’t do much good considering the skeletons are already dead. Nico rolls out from under the Chimera and lunges for the sword, sweeping it up off the ground. The skeletons suddenly pivot in place and each
lunges for a leg of the Chimera. They hold it down while Nico swing onto it’s back. The Chimera does his best to dislodge Nico, but the skeletons hold the monster down so it can’t do much more than twitch from side to side. Nico shoves the blade of his sword through the Chimera’s maw, and into the concrete, leaning his weight against it, so that the monster is now trapped to the ground and can’t breathe fire. The snake tail lunges at Nico but he frees a hand from the sword and draws his dagger, severing the snake’s head in one clean stroke. Then he turns to look over at Echidna smiles in a way that scares even you.

“How about I offer you a deal?” He presses the tip of his dagger into the crown of the Chimera. It whimpers in reply, and even your heart jerks a little bit. “You’re the mother of monsters right? Release Will, and I’ll release your child.”

Echidna’s grip on you tightens. Her claws dig a little harder into your throat and your breathing becomes shallow as the tips break your skin. Blood trickles down your neck, pooling in the hallow of your throat before soaking into the collar of your shirt.

Then she begins to shake, and make a horrible grating-bellowing noise. As Nico’s smile falls into a tight scowl, you realize that she is laughing.

“My son will regenerate,” she says.

The world starts to move in slow motion.

Nico’s mouth drops open.

Echidna’s fingers press into your throat with and the searing pain leaves your mind go blank.

Then her fingers freeze, and her arms loosen. Something jabs into the small of your back as you slip from her grip. It scrapes up your spine. You hit the asphalt as Echidna screams. Something smells like sulfur, and you see Nico slide into focus before your eyes. His mouth moves, but you can’t make out what he’s saying. Again, he says something, but you just shake your head.

*What?*

He grabs you beneath your arms and hauls you away as Echidna starts to thrash. Your mind returns to you again with a flood of sound, the screaming, the crackle of fire on the asphalt, Nico’s heavy breathing. It’s difficult for you to breath, and you can’t quite talk, but now that the panic has settled you’re aware of what’s happening.

“Rachel, get back!” Nico draws the celestial switchblade and runs towards Echidna.

*Get back?*

A black iron sword is pushed through Echidna’s back; her fingers fumble at it, as Rachel back tracks as fast as possible.

It takes you a moment but then you put the pieces together. Rachel went back into the car, found Nico’s sword and saved your life by stabbing it through Echidna to free you.

The four undead soldiers Nico had summoned earlier rush with him, and as they distract Echidna, Nico slips under her guard and buries the celestial bronze sword into her heart. She screams again, but it hardly matters. She crumbles into dust. More sulfur fills the air, and you teeter back and forth on the brink of consciousness. Something drips down into your eye again, and you swipe at it. Your hand comes back red. Oh, your head’s bleeding.
The undead soldiers turn to Nico, bow and then collapse into a piles of bones, which in turn are swallowed up by the earth.

“Rachel, are you alright?” Nico calls.

“I think there’s some glass in my palms,” she calls back, but thankfully she doesn’t sound too roughed up. Nico breaths a long sigh of relief.

“Okay. Come on Will, we can head back to the rest stop and clean up.” You nod, and a part of your brain knows that this is the time to move. But another part of your brain is still reeling from the shock of having nearly just died. You stare at the lacerations on your hands, which seem to be connecting invisible dots, leading to something, leading to nothing.

“Will, can you stand?” Nico crouches down by your side, and you mutely nod, ashamed that you can’t even form words right now. You curse your own cowardice, your own incompetence, as you push yourself up. Your legs shake.

“Here, let me-” Nico begins.

“I’m fine,” you snap. Nico’s hand jerk to a stop, and you hate yourself for yelling, but you also . . . Even Rachel was fine.

Nico doesn’t say anything, just turns and heads up the road.

. . .

You wash all the blood from your body and hair in the sink, and then bandage the cuts in your neck, and the cut on your forehead. After that, you help Rachel out. She did have glass in her palm, but you always carry a full first aid kit, plus a few extra things, so you get the glass out, rub some alcohol over her palm and bandage her up, as good as new. Neither of you talk much while you do this, and she’s nice enough not to comment on how your hands shake every time you put down a piece of medical equipment.

Back in the lobby Nico dragged a few things from the wreckage. Both you and Rachel had packed sleeping bags, which are now sitting in a corner. He has his own backpack, kept close at his side. There’s also a pile of vending machine snacks in the middle of the floor.

“Did you pay for these?” you ask. Nico looks at you like that’s the dumbest question he’s heard all day. “This place has cameras you know, people have to maintain these things.” Nico looks thoughtful for a second.

“I forgot you guys actually have personal records,” he says after a while.

“What?”

“Officially, I died in a hotel bombing in 1941. I don’t legally exist. If they look up my fingerprints, they’ll get my death certificate. And if they try to run a scan of my face, they’ll just get a ghost. I’ve been arrested for scaring some punks with my sword before, but no one could find any records of me and I just shadow traveled out of my cell. No one could explain it so no one said a thing.” He reaches over and opens up a bag of Cheetos like it’s no big deal.
“How do you register for things?” You run a hand through your damp hair, tugging at any knots you find.

“I don’t.”

“What about school?” What about voting? A house or an apartment? Your future, your job?

“What about it? Chiron’s teaching me.”

You realize after a few seconds, that part of the reason he’s not thinking about how being legally dead could affect his future, is because Nico only really thinks in terms of the present and past. Maybe some part of him doesn’t think he’ll live to be an adult, but it’s probably not that conscious. It’s more like, Nico knows he could die, and it doesn’t bother him, so all the danger of the future, the ultimate ending, hardly even exits.

It’s so different from you. You’re constantly thinking and panicking about something in your future, whether it be wars or testing in school. Sometimes you almost forget that you exist now, that your actions have weight. Funny, how you think so much about the future, but can’t even defend yourself in the present.

“Don’t worry about earlier,” Nico says, interrupting your thoughts. You sit back, and run the battle over in your head. It leaves a sour taste in your mouth.

“I was next to useless. Rachel had to save me. She’s not even battle trained,” you say.

“Rachel has saved most of the strongest demigods at some point or another. You’ve heard the hairbrush and Kronos story right? Plus, you saved my skin with that switchblade thing. Oh by the way-” He lifts up a little bit to pull the switchblade out of his pocket and toss it back to you.

“Thanks.” Looking down on it you feel stupidly useless again. You don’t even know how to use a sword, just . . .

“Where’d you get it?” Nico asks. You start. This is more conversation than Nico has every tried to make in all the time you’ve known him.

“Cecil,” you reply. He makes a noise of acknowledgment. It’s quiet after that. Rachel returns from the bathroom, and goes through her own backpack to extract her sketchbook. She quietly explains the premonition she had earlier, but in terms of feelings, nothing really concrete, no instructions. She just knows that you’re all headed the right way.

Your vending machine dinner is hardly satisfying, but it’s better than nothing. You know that you’re too quiet during the dinner, and that Nico and Rachel are worried about you, but you can’t quite muster up any words. All you want to say is sorry, but no one wants to hear that. You can’t really promise that you’ll do better next time, either. Cecil’s parting words come back to you, and you feel a little sick. You’re a doctor not a hero. What can you do?

You retire early to a little side room with dioramas of local animal life that you’re sharing with Nico, hoping to sleep off these feelings. They wish you goodnight.

“Oh, Nico since you were raising the dead, have some nectar and ambrosia before you go to sleep,” you say as a last thought before your mind really stops working. He nods. Rachel excuses herself too, and retires a different side room, one that contains dioramas of landmarks in Pennsylvania. Nico stays up a little longer.

In your dreams you’re back at your home in California. It’s the middle of the day. You call out for
your mother, but she’s not there. That’s not strange, she’s probably working. Everything is bright, a little too beautiful, like someone turned the saturation on the world way up. You like it, though. You like color.

You walk to your bedroom, and find that your English teacher, Ms. M is sitting on your bed, going through a photo album. You’re not as startled as you should be.

“Hello Fitzwilliam. You were a cute baby,” she says, with a little giggle. She turns the photo album around and shows the book to you. It’s got a picture of you as a cubby infant, in a man’s arms.

“Who is holding me?” you ask. Ms. M suddenly looks very old.

“Your father,” she says. You suddenly remember that you don’t own any photo albums. Your mother was never a big photo person, and all the pictures she has of you are framed around the house. “William Solace, what is my name?” Ms. M asks.

Suddenly the world tilts to the side, losing its oversaturated color, and Nico stumbles into your room, eyes wide and ragged. He leans against your doorway only long enough to take in your teacher as she disappears in a veiled cloud of white smoke.

“Good luck, little one” she whispers, and it rings around you as Nico stumbles towards you. Your home melts before your eyes and then Nico is very close to you.

“Close your eyes, Will,” his breath ghosts hot against your ear, but his voice is panicked and pleading. Something occurs to you. Should you be able to feel in a dream? The answer is no, you’ve had enough regular dreams to know that you shouldn’t be able to feel in them. So then this is either real, or a prophecy. You’re not sure which you would prefer.

A darkness swallows up your vision, churning in a tangled mass of shadows, it seems to be rushing towards you at an incredible speed but goes nowhere.

“Will, please,” Nico’s body shakes where he brushes against you. And he feels like he might collapse but he doesn’t flinch when you put a hand against his arm, “Close your eyes!”

He doesn’t wait for you to obey, doesn’t ask again, just presses his hands over your eyes. When even Nico is swallowed up from your sight, you can feel a cold wind blow over you, and you can no longer sense light on your skin. The world is only dark. Still, behind Nico’s hand you close your eyes, and though the world gets no darker, you feel like you have offered up your control. Your world is now sound and touch.

“Nico what-”

Something like a voice breaks the still air, but the words are indistinct, ricocheting around the darkness, until it’s impossible for you to pinpoint where the voice is even coming from. The sound terrifies you to your very core, reminds you of the hellhound that attacked you when you were six, Lee’s body lying open and unmoving on the operating table, and the slow forward march of Kronos’ army. You begin to shiver, and Nico must feel this because he begins talking again.

“I’m sorry, he won’t leave unless he talks to you-”

“Who-”

Again there is a sound like words making circles around you, but this time you begin to recognize sounds, parts that are almost like Ancient Greek or Latin. There is no cadence to the voice but you have your father’s blood. You would recognize what it sounds like when someone is trying to speak.
“Will, please, just close your eyes and—” Nico’s shaking hands are still pressed against your eyes, so you slowly wind your fingers around his and push him back.

“My eyes are closed, see?” you say as calmly as you possibly can. Your voice cracks a little at the end, but you squeeze his hands to let him know that it’s alright. You’re scared but it’s okay. This isn’t a fight, if something just wants to talk, you can . . . You can work with that. Nico seems to know what’s happening and you trust him.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he keeps rattling off apologies. You lean forward slowly, until your forehead touches his. He stills beneath you.

“It’s alright, Nico, it’s okay.” Your voice is too high to be anything but scared, but you’re trying. “Just tell me what’s going on, please.”

Nico lets out a long sigh, and his breath ghosts across your lips.

“Erebus is here, and he has something he wants to say to you. He won’t tell me what it is.” Nico grits out the last part, and something cold settles in your stomach.

“Erebus. . ?” That name seems all too familiar.

“The primordial god of darkness. He can’t stay out of Tartarus for very long, even in a dream.” It comes to you then, the memory of a boy standing out in the coliseum, looking up at the sun like he’d never seen it before.

“He’s Landon’s father, right?”

The moaning voice speaks again in its unspoken language, but this time you recognize a word, repeated back to you: “Landon.” Your heart starts to beat out of your chest, rattling your body. The primordial god of darkness clawed his way out of Tartarus to talk to you about his dead son, the son you couldn’t save. You don’t think you’re going to die, you doubt Nico would have helped Erebus meet with you if he thought he was going to kill you. But still . . . His son’s blood is on your hands, there’s not much worse he could accuse you of.

“Yes, he’s Landon’s father,” Nico answers. There is a pause, and then he says, “Don’t open your eyes Will, please. There are things demigods shouldn’t see.” Nico steps away from you, but he leaves one of his hands clasped in yours. It’s a thin lifeline connecting the two of you in this unseeing darkness. As soon as Nico is no longer standing between you and the darkness, the chattering rises in pitch, almost like it’s screeching.

“His eyes are closed, Erebus.” Nico doesn’t sound frantic or strained anymore, just tired, and maybe a little frustrated. He pauses for a while, listening to the dips and chatters of the voice, before saying: “I know he . . . He can’t help it.”

“Can’t help what?”

“You glow, and it’s sort of always there. It took me a while to notice it, but . . . remember when I hid you in shadows and you didn’t feel a thing? It’s like there’s a film of light around you, a little aura, or force filed. Erebus is afraid of light.”

You can feel something around you shifting and churning, more present than the shadows. It circles you like a wolf, disturbing the air. Then it stops and advances. As it draws nearer the air around you goes cold, slowly leaching away any heat until your skin feel bare and exposed.

“Erebus,” Nico’s voice is low and sharp with warning.
The chattering and lolling of Erebus’ words begin again, but this time they’re more distinct.

“Landon,” the god says, and you can feel Erebus approach despite Nico’s warning. The air doesn’t grow any colder, but you can still feel it sliding against your skin. It’s not enough to shiver, just to make you want to curl in on yourself.

The chattering grows more frantic, and more distressed, building on each note of hysteria as the thing in the shadows draws nearer. His voice starts to strain against your ears and you wonder, is this what it’s like to glimpse a god’s true form? It feels like there are fingers reaching inside your head and drawing their nails along your eardrums. You squeeze Nico’s hand a little tighter.

“Landon,” Erebus says and something cold touches your arm. It doesn’t burn like dry ice, and yet the touch lingers on your skin, sinks into your bones, leaves you empty. There is a silence, and you take this as your cue to respond.

“I remember your son,” you say, voice shaking.

“My son, my son!” His voice goes high with hysterics, all of those up-built tensions drawing painfully tight, and for a moment you worry he’s going to snap.

“Yes he- I’m sorry I tried to save him, but his wounds were too deep he-”

“Landon!” The name is only half spoken, before Erebus breaks off in a high note of discord, a wail that rings out, filling every space around you. Then there is another tear in the darkness, clawing against your ears, a horrid sob, “My baby!” Guilt wracks your body. You wish you could say that Landon went peacefully, but you know he suffered until the end. You couldn’t even stop the pain.

“My baby, my baby,” the voice repeats over and over again, falling from every direction, “you . . . you.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry I couldn’t-I tried, I’m sorry-”

Your voice peters out into nothing but shattered words. You shake too much to speak. Nico draws closer to you, presses his arm against yours so that you can feel him, and know he’s there. Still Erebus screams.

“I’m so sorry.” Tears sting behind your eyes as your voice barely scrapes out in a whisper. “I’m so sorry.”

“Erebus, he doesn’t understand you.” Nico’s voice is low and calm, sweeping out into the tattered thrashing of Erebus’ voice and your pleads. “Tell me what you want him to know.”

The raw tangle of a voice peters out, back into the strange morphing chattering you heard when your dream first became a nightmare. Nico squeezes your hand, and you can hear him suck in one slow breath.

“He says . . . he says, ‘thank you. Thank you so much, my baby, Landon he was my only child, my . . . my first child. He was so brave. No one cared about my child, the little gods did not care about my baby, but you tried to save him.'” Nico’s voice breaks, you can feel his hand tremble, but you feel the same.

Something inside of you starts to break, and you remember Landon lying on the operating table, vomiting black sludge, and trying desperately to let you know how to save Pollux. He was somebody’s child.
“Your son died a hero,” you say, swallowing back the urge to cry. “He—he saved someone else’s life, a boy named Pollux. If it wasn’t for him, we never would have found Python.” The chattering stops, and for a moment you wonder if Erebus can understand you. Then the silence is pierced by another wail, and the darkness begins to thrash. Nico has stopped shaking. This is reassuring, until you remember something about him you never could quite put your finger on before. When Nico fights he is elegant, because when he is ready to fight he is as still as any moment before the storm. Now Nico’s hand is so still in yours.

“Erebus says, ‘he took my shadows, my shadows killed my baby, I killed my baby, my poor baby, it’s all my fault’”

“No!” You can’t stop yourself from cutting in, because that is so wrong. “It wasn’t your fault, Python did this. He took your shadows and your child, my friend. It’s his fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. He’s your enemy.”

The chattering pauses again and Nico’s hand begins to shake again.

“Thank you,” Erebus’s voice is long and drawn out, wavering in tone down to the last syllable in a horrible wail that has you cringing.

Despite the terrible sound, the doctor in you takes over. Practice makes perfect. Your standard reply is on your lips, something about how Erebus doesn’t need to thank you. You were doing your job. But something dark and cold closes around you, pressing solid against your arms. Then you hear it again, a faintly mumbled “thank you,” next to your ears.

You wake up on the floor of the rest stop in a cold sweat, shaking. Even in the middle of the night the world seems so bright. There are stars somewhere outside, lampposts, and a film of light pollution that makes the black of the sky glow a faint blue. For a moment you wish you had the ability to think your dream was just a dream, a nightmare, nothing real. But demigods have never had that kind of comfort.

“Will?” Nico is right by your side, scrambling across the hard floor and over to your sleeping bag. His hands cup your cheeks with a surprising amount of care, even though the calloused pads of his fingers scrape your skin a little. Your body rebels against your instructions to sit up and respond. Every muscle is locked in place as adrenaline and exhaustion fight for control. “I know he’s a Tartarus creature, I know he’s . . .”

Nico’s pupils are blown wide in the darkness, so that only a thin strip of dark brown rings around the edges. His face crinkles and his lips pull down, like he’s horribly guilty.

“What?” Now that you can see his face, you don’t have to worry about putting everything together from the changes in his tone, you can see the way his eyes widen, and the rest of his face goes very still. This isn’t like that darkness. This is alright, you can take solace in that.
“He didn’t . . . the p-pyre b-burned . . . he didn’t, he didn’t say goodbye. He didn’t know.” You can’t really stop the tears from slipping down your cheeks, but you remember hearing about Birdy, and this person you were supposed to protect, and in the end you weren’t even there for the pyre. Sometimes you still remind yourself to look out for him, think, don’t forget about Birdy, and look to high places for him, only to remember that he’s not there. He’ll never be there. You can’t imagine what it was like. Landon was the first child he ever lost and he didn’t get to say goodbye.

Nico collapses back onto the floor next to you, not with any sort of grace, but with a few choppy jerks that says he at least tried to ease back down. Once he settles he puts one hand back on your cheek.

“I know. Most don’t.” His fingertips inch up into your hairline, gently brushing away loose curls from your forehead. Nico’s eyes are fixed on his fingers, strangely intent for such a simple task. Or rather, maybe his eyes show all the intent of his words, but he feels like he can’t look at you right now, for his own reasons or because he thinks he’s doing you a courtesy by pretending he doesn’t notice you’re still shivering and sobbing. The two of your stay like that for a while, nearly tangled together on top of your sleep bag, listening to the sounds of night creatures and your sobs and his quiet breathing.

After a while you begin to drift back to sleep, though your tears are still wet on your cheeks.

“Nico could you,” your voice falters as your eyelids start to droop, “If it’s possible, I know it might not be, so you don’t-”

Nico huffs a little laugh, “Just ask, Will.”

“Could you, help him say goodbye? Just, for a moment, if Landon’s ghost could meet him, or if he could get out of Tartarus . . .” Your words fail you as Nico’s hand in your hair goes still. You’re half a second away from backpedaling, when Nico scooches a little closer to you.

“Okay,” he says.

Your body grows heavy and numb, as you try to mutter out a thank you.

“Goodnight,” he says.

Something soft touches your forehead, and the last thing to cross your mind before you slip under is how warm the touch was.

The grimy rest stop windows do nothing to block out the sun as soon as it rises. You stir, cursing the headache pulsing behind your eyes and your dry throat. You would ask why this is happening to you, but you vaguely remember having a nightmare last night, and crying afterwards. Great. You’re emotionally hung over, that’s the last thing you need on this gods forsaken quest.

Nico’s isn’t in the little side room and neither is his backpack, so you struggle into a change of clothes as quickly as you can and pad out into the lobby. He’s not inside the lobby either, so you check outside and find him carefully tending a little fire in the parking lot, stirring around the pieces of smoldering wood with a look like can see Hades in the ash.
“Nico?” Your voice cracks when you speak, but it’s just because your mouth is as dry as sandpaper.

“Here, you should drink something.” Nico quickly turns away from the fire and grabs his own canteen from his backpack. You join him squatting next to the little fire. Even this early in the morning, the air is a little too hot, but there’s something comforting about a hearth, even if it is in the middle of a parking lot in gods-know-where Pennsylvania. Nico passes you the canteen, and he doesn’t flinch when your hands brush, but you’re left with a chill. For a moment you’re surprised, and watch him carefully as you take a sip.

He looks like he’s hardly slept. The dark circles under his eyes are heavy and purple, and his skin is paler than normal.

“Nico, have you been using Underworld magic?” you ask, wiping a stray drop of water from your lips. Nico hesitates for a moment, before giving you a searching look.

“Is it that obvious that I’ve seen a ghost?” he asks, with a faint smile. You almost start at his honesty, but instead just hand him back his canteen. He screws the lid shut and slips it back into his backpack before buckling the backpack closed. It’s a fastidious little detail you wouldn’t have expected from him, but then again, if all he owns is in that backpack it makes sense that he would be careful with it all.

“You do look a little rough,” you say carefully, wondering if maybe he’ll let you take his pulse if you don’t push too much.

“Yeah. Do you remember your nightmare with Erebus last night?” It’s a strange jump, and for a moment you’re a little alarmed to know that Nico was in your nightmare too.

“I remember I had a nightmare, but I wasn’t really sure what it was about.” If you remember correctly Erebus isn’t someone you’d want in your dreams. Nico looks at you for a second longer before carefully studying the fire.

“He talked about Landon,” he says, and at the mention of Landon’s name it all comes rushing back to you, the fear the dread, the pride and pain. You put for head between your knees and suck in a long breath. Then you tilt your head back and let it out in one long stream.

“I remember,” you say. Something else comes to you, a brief memory of waking up for just a moment, but it slips through your fingers and dissolves in the morning light like fog. You doubt you’ll get that memory back.

“I’m sorry,” Nico says as he curls in on himself a little bit, “you were so scared.”

“Don’t be sorry, it’s alright. I’d gladly be scared if it meant I could help him. Is that why you look so tired?” you ask. Nico looks at you, searching for sincerity before he finds it. Something akin to a smile stretches his mouth, but his eyes are too heavy to really make him seem happy.

“You’re always putting other people first, you should let someone take care of you sometime,” he chides. “Anyway, I had some things to talk about with him afterward, ghosts to look for. I’ll tell you about that after I manage to get everything settled, nothing to worry about now. Oh, I had shadow pathways to secure too.” His hair is a tangled mess, and you want to push his heavy bangs from his face. But there’s also a strange amount of calm about Nico, an ease that he’s never quite expressed in your presence. You’re worried that you’ll ruin it if you push too hard.

“Oh . . . Shadow pathways?” You grasp for anything to keep this conversation going and see more of this relaxed Nico.
“Erebus doesn’t let just anyone use his shadows to travel, but as a child of Hades he lets me do what I want for the most part,” Nico sits back on his hand and reaches the other out towards the fire. The smoke curls and wraps around his hand in an almost affectionate gesture before he releases it back towards the sky. It seems so easy to him that you don’t even want to reprimand him for using magic after tiring himself out yesterday.

“That’s kind of strange,” you say. You’re used to gods being pretty territorial with their domains. Last you checked, Percy’s still on the no fly list.

“It’s not really, he’s afraid of Hades.”

“What?” Most mortals are afraid of Hades, but why would another god be?

“Hades isn’t afraid of the light. He and his children can move between both light and darkness, without fear. Erebus doesn’t understand how we can look out into the light without being driven mad, and so he’s afraid of us.” You let that sink in. In a way, it makes sense. The reason most kids are afraid of the children of Hades is because they’re not afraid of the dark. Hades has always been a kind of liminal space, so it’s not surprising that all things on either side are wary of him.

“That’s amazing,” you mutter, staring up at the sky. There are still stripes of grey clouds, but you can see hints of blue peaking out between them.

“Hey Will,” Nico says again, jolting you out of your reverie a bit, “this is going to sound like a crazy question, but you were claimed by Apollo right?”

“What? Of course, I was.” Nico visibly relaxes. “I mean I didn’t have one of those glowing things pop up over my head, but . . . Well I know I’m Apollo’s kid. He actually used ‘hey I’m Apollo’ as a pickup line on my mom after she mistook him for Brad Pit.” Nico snorts a laugh.

“Are you serious?”

“Scout’s honor.”

“And that worked?”

“I know right? Maybe I should try that sometime. Hey Nico, I’m the son of Apollo.” You waggle your eyebrows at him, and Nico just rolls his eyes and bumps your shoulder.

“Oh Mr. Solace, I’m swooning.”

“Hmm, looks like there really is magic in particular words.” You put a hand under chin as if you were very seriously considering this. Nico flops down onto the concrete with a groan.

“Ugh, gods, never mind. You’re definitely an Apollo kid.”

“What’s this about?” you ask, watching him take in a long slow breath.

“Erebus called you something I didn’t recognize, it wasn’t the ghost word for Apollo’s child, so I was just curious.” Nico shrugs, and doesn’t seem too terribly worried, but something tickles at the back of your mind. When Nico mentioned Erebus last night, you vaguely remember that part of your nightmare, but before that . . . was there something else? The second you try to grasp at that ghost of a feeling it flutters away, and you’re left with nothing. You guess it’s nothing to worry about.

“Huh, weird,” you say in response.
“Yeah it sounded like, well the word sounded kind of like the word Python, but also like the word prophet. Doesn’t matter, he was probably speaking something too old for me to know. Apollo’s a prophet, and he killed Python.” He shrugs it off as a chill runs down our spine. A question pops into your head.

*William Solace, what is my name?*

However before you can ask anymore Rachel bursts through the doors of the rest stop.

“Morning boys, you ready to hit the road?” She looks a little sleepless too, but her eyes are wide and manic, and there’s a sketchbook tucked underneath her arm.

“Do you have a lead?” you ask, and she trots over with her sketchbook. You and Nico huddle around it as she flips to the right page. There’s color to this sketch, and an almost unnerving amount of detail. The metal of the bird’s cage glistens in the early morning light, the dove’s feathers look soft to the touch, and the sickly green scales of the snake that strikes at the bird look like they’re moving. You stare at it for a moment. A snake sneaking into a bird cage, and a bird flying out to escape.

“What does it mean?” you ask. Rachel shrugs.

“I don’t know, but I bet we’ll find out,” She snaps the sketchbook shut and pops to her feet. Nico scowls, looking off down the road like it’s personally responsible for Apollo missing and Python running rampant.

“Joy.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay so! This was an emotional rollercoaster to write. I hope there was enough happy to balance out all of the fucking angst, but like also some of the angst is hopefully cathartic, so yeah.

The next two chapters will also be this long, but not to worry, now that it's summer time and I'm not killing myself academically, so I actually have this crazy thing called free time. But yeah, I don't actually have a lot to say otherwise, stay tuned for more attempted murder and gay pining. And also like a barrel full of minor gods.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

I'm back and better than ever. Shout out to my wonderful, amazing, spectacular Beta, Elisah. Thanks to her I was able to do a massive grammatical facelift on this story, so now, if you were to read the entire thing, you would notice fancy new things like, proper dialogue formatting, the word 'below' spelled correctly, and a 99% reduction in unnecessary comas. It's great. Now my story doesn't read like I learned english grammar from google translate.

Anyway, as promised, that barrel full of minor gods/goddesses.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are a lot of things you expect to find while walking out in the middle of West Pennsylvania, trees, corn, grass, more trees. You’re pretty sure there’s not supposed to be this much forest in West Pennsylvania, but there is, and you decide after a few hours that you never want to see another tree again in your life. However, you’d still expect to find trees in the middle of nowhere.

You don’t expect to find a college. At first you’re not even really sure it is a college, considering the entrance looks more like a castle. There’s a huge stone building with an enormous arch in the middle, and a stone plaque that proudly declares “Patterson College” on its front. Something about the name rings a bell. Maybe it was on the list of schools your mother picked out for after high school. There appears to be a bus stop opposite the grand arch, and you make a note of that, while you look for anything that might be monster related, just in case.

Rachel groans, but it sounds relieved to your ears.

“Thank the gods, I need coffee.” She marches right through the arch and down the neatly paved road that appears to cut down the campus’ center. Without a better idea, you trail along after her, and hope you don’t look too much like a lost high school student. Everything on the campus is beautiful and lush underneath the summer sun, though it all smells a bit like fertilizer. To your surprise there appears to be students here, running about, maybe taking summer classes or doing internships on campus. The farther you all walk along the road the more people there are, until you enter into a square.

A part of your brain informs you that this is probably called the quad, because you’ve seen a lot of college movies, and big squares surrounded by buildings and bustling with people are usually called quads. A fountain juts up from the middle, surrounded by a lovely bed of what appears to be petunias, though you’re not a flower expert. The big green lawn encircling the fountain is cut into four pieces by the intersection of your road with another. To your left and right big stone buildings mark the boundaries of the quad. Directly across from you an old school house with yellow paint caps off your road, standing proud with its doors open. There might have been a fund raiser or alumni event because several older people in polo shirts and polite sundresses gather on its steps with little cups of champaign in their hands.

A few people are lying in the grass, a few more are throwing around a frisbee. A tour group passes
by on the road perpendicular to you, its host walking backwards. Across the quad a troop of summer campers all run towards a low wood and stone building, which must be the cafeteria. They remind you of camp, except they’re all dressed in blue t-shirts and their walking sticks aren’t spears, and the most dangerous thing they’ve ever built at arts and crafts was probably a rubber-band gun. Professional looking people lounge by the fountain, all dressed in black suits and black shifts. Perhaps they’re interns on their lunch break, or perhaps they’re from a town nearby, just taking their lunch. Mothers with jogging strollers clump up on the roadways, laughing, enjoying the summer scenery. An old man with graying hair walks his shaggy Labrador through the brilliant green grass.

Rachel starts to walk off, but you’re a little too mesmerized by the look of this place to pay her much attention.

In all honestly you had always hoped to be able to go to college, but you had never really believed you would. Stumbling onto this place during a quest feels like both a cruelty and a kindness. It’s something you might never truly be a part of, but at least you get to glimpse it. Suddenly Nico’s hand clamps onto your arm, and you nearly jump out of your skin.

“Wha-” Your thought cuts off as you whip your head around and catch his wide-eyed look. It’s impossible to tell what he’s feeling. His face has become something built for war. It shifts from hard and determined to open and thinking to quick and hostile. He starts to move away and your fingers barely snag his in time to stop him.

“Where are you going?” you ask, but he just shakes you off. He sees something, off in the distance that you can’t quite understand. For a moment you think that it might be a ghost.

There are a lot of things you have come understand about Nico di Angelo. No matter how hard you try, ghosts will never be one of them.

Your grip lightens, just enough for him to slip out.

A little too late, you realize you had your fingers pressed to his pulse and you couldn’t feel a thing. In a moment the world tips sideways, and your heart clenches in your chest.

“Stay put!” he shouts behind him, then he’s gone, somewhere between the crowd of college students and civilians.

“Nico, wait!” It’s an irrational fear that leaves you calling after him. After all, he isn’t disappearing just yet. This morning he was cold, and he was tired, but he wasn’t the thin whispers of a boy who nearly left you in the hospital so many nights ago. Nearly a year ago.

It’s been so long.

You have learned a lot about Nico di Angelo, and one of the most important things you have learned is that he is always better with someone by his side. Your feet begin to follow the last thing you had of him, an idea of direction, somewhere away from the quad.

“Hope!” The voice belongs to a woman, and for the first moments it leaves her lips you don’t quite process the words, just the tone. A few feet away, near the base of the fountain, a woman with rich brown skin clutches her hands against her chest, and she calls out again. “Where are you?”

The others in the quad don’t seem to see her. They just pass her by.

“Please,” she stops a young man as he passes with a hand on his shoulder, “have you seen my daughter?” He stares at her for a moment, like he had just come out of a dream, or like the woman
had, and then he shakes his head. Her hand drops from his shoulder.

Your feet run to her before you can really process the impulse. A person is in pain. You fix pain. That’s what you do; it doesn’t really take thinking sometimes.

“Excuse me ma’am, do you need help?”

The woman jumps, and her eyes seem to roam over your entire body before stopping on your face. Something she sees eases her shoulders down a little bit. Maybe she was looking for sincerity, you’ve certainly got that in spades.

“I've lost my daughter, please, can you help me find her? I don’t- I can’t lose her.”

Finding means you would have to go looking. For a moment, guilt twists in your gut. It’s clear now that you can’t follow after Nico, but could you run the opposite way? Nico told you to stay put, and if he needs help, he might not be able to find you. Still . . . The woman looks at you, with tears in her eyes, and you swallow back your worry. Nico can take care of himself. Besides, what could you do to help him? You’re no good at fighting.

Right now, there’s a child out there who needs your help. You can fix that.

“Oh, course ma’am. You said you lost your daughter around. . . ?”

A small girl on a college campus shouldn’t be too hard to find, and even if you don’t know much about the campus, she can’t have gone far.

“We were taking here on the quad. I turned around for a second and she was gone.” The woman presses a hand over her mouth and squeezes her eyes shut in order to regain her quickly failing composure.

“It’s all right, we’ll find her. What is your daughter’s name?” Her first shout registers just a second before she speaks.

“Hope,” she says.

Right, you should have remembered that. It’s okay though, you just have to stay calm.

“Oh, okay, don’t worry, we’ll find her . . . let’s see.” You look around the area for groups of students, people who would know their way around, who might help. A couple of lacrosse players practicing over summer lug their gear across the quad, laughing and joking.

“Excuse me!” You rush over, explain the situation, and ask for their help. The whole time one of them stares at you strangely. You keep glancing at him out of the corner of your eye, wondering if he’s checking you out or something. Frankly, you look a little like shit, so that doesn’t seem likely. Besides, he doesn’t really look all that pleased. In fact the looks a little worried. He says he’ll go and get the rest of the team, before the other two head off to talk to their Campus Safety. You nod, and then jog back to the woman.

“Do you have more details of your daughter? I know that a child on a college campus is a pretty easy to spot but maybe-”

“Will Solace?” A girl’s voice calls to you, one you don’t recognize. You turn around to see the lacrosse player retuning with another college student. She has mousey brown hair and impish features that strike you as strangely familiar. Yet somehow you can’t quite place her face.
“Yes?” you ask. Then slow curl of dread descends upon you, like cold fingers walking down your spine. A monster will just know your name. There’s no easy way to bail out of his situation, so your brain starts to think of ways to stall before anyone even speaks.

The girl with impish features flicks her eyes over the woman standing behind you in a quick and measured saccade. Her eyes go wide, sticking to the woman.

“You’re a goddess aren’t you?” she asks, though it’s more a statement than a question. The woman behind you nods, and manages a faint smile.

“Hestia,” she says.

You link the facts of this situation together as quickly as possible, as it is slowly climbing into the realm of magic. Magic, you have learned, is a very dangerous thing when you’re alone.

“Who-”

“Addie Baker,” the girl says before you have a chance to get a foothold in conversation wise. “Child of Hermes. You probably don’t remember, but we met a few times in the infirmary.”

It clicks in your head, the image of twin brown braids, scraped knees, burns, and an impish face.

“Oh.” You can’t say you ever really knew who she was, but you take her hand and shake it. Any sibling of Cecil is a friend of yours. Well, as long as they’re not leading an army of monsters that it.

“What-”

“Before we get to that, is there anything I should know?” Her voice is clipped and sure, which immediately marks her as someone who is used to doing damage control. You have no problem filling her in on the situation, and throw in the bits about Nico and Rachel being off somewhere too.

“Did you say Hestia’s daughter?” Addie asks, cutting Hestia a not-so-subtle look out of the corner of her eye. You shrug, and really hope this is some sort of weird loophole like with Athena, because you really don’t need to add “virgin goddess breaks her oath” to your list of things you should be worrying about. Addie nods like your blind hope and ambivalence is good enough for her, then takes in a deep breath and turns back to the lacrosse boy.

“Jeremy, get the others, put them in search teams of two. Will, is your quest companion injured?” She speaks to you without looking at you. Instead her eyes stay focused on Hestia, like she’s not sure what the goddess would do if she let her out of her sight.

“We suffered a monster attack recently, but his mobility and combat abilities shouldn’t be handicapped. Although the longer he’s on his own the more likely it is he’ll do something reckless.” Nico can take care of himself; the problem comes when he thinks he has to do everyone on his own. You’ve never met someone more skilled in brinkmanship.

“Alright then, he can fend for himself for a little while, so Hestia’s daughter is first priority.” She punches Jeremy in the shoulder as a sendoff. Jeremy nods and runs off across the quad, slipping between two stone buildings. You watch him go, before turning back to Addie.

“How many demigods are there here?” you ask. Something strange flutters around in your heart. You know you should be mad that there’s a secret college with demigods in it, but the possibility of a future is a little more real now than it ever was before, and how could you be mad about that?

Addie blinks back at you before smiling, like she wouldn’t have thought you would guess there were more.
“There are fourteen here, another seven scattered around liberal arts schools nearby. I think there are another three at Harvard, a handful are going to grad school on the East Coast somewhere.” Her hand fiddles with her hair, unclipping a disastrous looking pink sparkly clip. She holds it like a knife, and so you know it’s more than meets the eye. You remember the switchblade in your back pocket.

“What is this?” you ask, gesturing around you. You could put the bulleted list of facts down on paper, and read them over, and you still wouldn’t quite know what this means for you.

“I’ll tell you while we look for that friend of yours. Hestia, would mind staying with his other friend while we search for your daughter?” She nods politely to Hestia, testing to see just how she might react. You don’t exactly have a lot of experience with gods, but you know experience when you see it, and Addie has it.

“Of course,” Hestia says. She wipes the heel of her hand underneath her eye and straightens her dress.

“I’m assuming you know where she is?” Again, you can feel Addie pressing, as if she expects the goddess to have a hidden agenda.

“No, but I can’t imagine that it’s too difficult to find Apollo’s prophetess.” With a sigh, Hestia wanders off in search of a one stop coffee shop and prophet. Addie blinks after her for a while before something finally clicks.

“Apollo’s . . . Rachel’s here?” You nod and she shakes her head. “Just what have you dragged us into, Will?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t really know what we’ve run into either.” You look around you and expect that at any moment, someone’s going to jump out and yell ‘surprise’ and then the whole camp will be there. Your first quest is a joke! Ha ha, we found Apollo, you can come back to camp now. The other students pass you by, as if you don’t exist, and the world is quiet.

“Which way did the other kid go, your quest partner?” she asks. You point, and Addie takes the lead across the green. She starts talking without looking at you, like things are easier to explain if there’s no audience.

“This is Patterson College, it’s exactly like its brochures say: a pleasant liberal arts college founded on trust, concern, and respect. Most everything is student run, it’s a pretty isolated campus with plenty of woodlands and a little college town nearby, and it’s known for its student niche groups. The normal, polite, façade of this place is what makes it the perfect place for demigods to go to college. The campus is small enough that if a demigod is in trouble any one of us could cross the campus in fifteen minutes, but it still mostly smells like humans. No one questions our weapons, because we say they’re fake, and part of our LARP group or they’re magically concealed like mine. Most of the monsters attack from the forest, but the trees provide good cover, and I can set up traps to stop them in advance. The campus is a national arboretum so people tend to stick to the paths instead of run around in the actual woods. The students run orientation and there’s a student committee for sorting freshman housing so if we have people on the board, we can pick demigods and cluster them together on the same halls.

“Chiron keeps us updated every month or so with what we need to know about the big changes in the prophecy. You know, if doomsday is happening and all that. He skimps out on the details because he wants us to move on, but some of us will keep in contact with our siblings and ask about more specific news. We never spill the location of our college though.”

“Why?” If you had known this was here, then maybe . . . You don’t know. This is big. You feel like
should be able to feel something.

“Because if not even the demigods know about it than the monsters don’t know either. The ones that do find the college just stumble onto it by accident and we take care of them before they can tell. Besides, I don’t think Chiron wants to get anyone’s hopes up. So many accidents happen. I remember we were supposed to get Beckendorf two years ago, but he died just a few weeks before orientation. It’s . . . It’s not easy. The older kids, counselors especially, they tend to die in their last years. But you’re an Apollo kid, I don’t have to tell you that.” She doesn’t mean to be callous. You can tell by her tone that she’s just saying the truth. In a way that makes it all the worse.

You don’t really know what to say, so you don’t say anything.

All of the campus is as lovely as the front. It doesn’t have the wild beauty of camp, but the manicured flowerbeds and collections of pretty trees with information plaques on them are pleasant. You could almost forget there’s a missing child running around somewhere.

Suddenly Addie sticks out her hand, a motion for you to stop. You’ve reached the forested area at the edge of campus. In front of you a nature trail winds from left to right.

“Did you hear that?” she asks. You give a short shake of your head. “I think one of my traps was triggered.”

You close your eyes and focus, searching for a sound. Somewhere off in the distance you hear it, something like an explosion. Addie snaps her hairclip open, and in her hand it morphs into a bow. She reaches into her hair, grabs a bobby pin, and places it on the bow. The bobby pin morphs into an arrow. Another explosion sounds closer, and you can hear the echoes of shouts leaking back to you.

“What are the chances that all that noise is your friend?” She skitters over to a fallen log with a bench carved into it and crouches behind. You follow, crouching at her side.

“Knowing Nico, it’s pretty likely.” Addie raises an eyebrow. You give her a thin smile, but she doesn’t quite look like she believes you.

The sounds get closer, the steal sound of swords clashing, and voices echoing and breaking. A low hiss permeates the forest. Is it the breeze blowing through the trees or a snake? You don’t know, though the more you listen the more your pounding heart convinces you it’s a snake. Another explosion rocks through the forest, and now you can see the flicker of orange flame from deep in the grove. At high noon shafts of light pierce the canopy overhead, leaving the lower foliage a checkerboard of light and shadow. Forms dart through just out of sight. Here and there you swear you see something, a flash of scales, a spark of feathers, leathery skin, an eye. Everything begins to skew, the beams of light the shadows in between, mixing into an unknowable flickering.

Addie whispers a low curse.

Another explosion rocks the round beneath your feet and all you can think is how will the mortals spin this one? Smoke rushes out onto the path, turning your eyes to useless things. Addie begins to cough up a lung, but you held your breath and ducked to the ground the second you saw it coming. Pressed up against the earth, you open your mouth, and suck in a breath that tastes like wet dirt. There is a sliver of clear air just above the ground. You can see it beneath the edge of the bench, where it extends towards the next tree line. Something shifts at the tree line, and then a puddle of shadows becomes a pair of black boots.

Behind you there’s a chorus of shouts. The lacrosse boy Jeremy comes running with a smattering of other college aged kids, haphazardly dressed in armor over t-shirts and summer dresses. In their
hands are tried and true weapons of celestial bronze. Despite their general disarray, there is something about them that breathes surety. It hits you after a moment. They’re the survivors. Armored or not, they know what they’re doing.

The black boots at the edge of the tree line take a step forward out into the light. There are scuffs on the toe, and a thin film of yellow dust. The laces are frayed at the ends, held together with only half an aglet to each. For half a second your heart nearly gives, but then you press up from the ground with a smile on your face and shout, “Nico!”

Addie jumps, and falls back on her butt, as she fires her arrow in an arc so wide you watch it sail right onto the dirt trail. Maybe startling a mob of keyed up vets wasn’t your best idea, but Nico’s all right, so everything is going to be fine.

“Your friend?” Addie asks, scowling at you from the ground. You can’t even be sorry; you just smile back. The smoke obscures his figure as he approaches, so at first you don’t notice that he’s got anything other than his backpack on his back. But as his face appears so does a second head, and thin brown arms wrapped around his neck. Then Nico’s presence cuts through the fog, and he’s fully present now. Sound seems to cut out.

You vault the bench as behind you someone asks, is that-

Did he-

How did-

Who is he-

What is he-

“Nico!” Your hands fly to his face as he shoves his black blade into the sheath at his side. He’s cold. There is blood on his face, oozing from micro scratches scattered like freckles across the sallow planes of his skin and dribbling from the single gash across his cheek. Even the blood is cold. That gash will need stitches. Those bags under his eyes will need sleep. The color and the cold will need . . . something. You can figure this out.

Nico takes a step back, but it’s only so that he can kneel. His arms lower the creature on his back, a little girl, to the ground. She wears a white chiffon dress, and blue Mary Janes with mismatched socks. One sock is white with pineapples and the other is ruffled with rainbow beads hanging like tassels from the lace’s edge. That, more than her tiny body and big eyes, and the terrified way she clings to Nico’s pant leg even as he stands, tells you that she is a child, not just some monster in a child’s body. It should shock you that Nico’s found the lost girl, but maybe it makes more sense. Nico is probably used to seeing lost things, and maybe a little girl isn’t so different from a ghost. Horror movies would have you believe that. Maybe there’s not such a big difference between being scary and being scared.

“Are you Hope?” you ask, crouching down in front of her so that you can show her you are both small. She looks at you with bright, intense eyes, a pretty butterscotch in the noon light.

“Yes,” she says.

“Your mother’s been looking for you. We can take you to her,” you say. Hope shuffles behind Nico’s leg a little more. He reaches down and pats her head lightly. The gesture seems to soothe her, though she still looks frightened.

“Will’s alright, Hope,” Nico says. You have never heard a more lack luster endorsement of your
character, but Hope’s eyes go wide and she stares at you with a new and profound interest.

“You can hold Nico’s hand the whole time back to your mother if it makes you feel safer. You know he’ll keep you safe,” you say.

Hope’s eyes narrow, like she still doesn’t quite trust you, but she grabs Nico’s hand anyway. You stand and prepare to give Nico an apologetic look in lieu of an apology for volunteering him, but his face is no more disgruntled than it always is. After a second Hope reaches over and grabs your hand too. You start and look down at her. She meets your gaze and for a moment her butterscotch eyes seem to glow gold.

“You’re alright William Solace,” she says and then she nods like that’s a fact. You look to Nico for an explanation but his eyes are on Hope. Hope swings their linked hands as they walk with a little too much gusto. Nico quietly complains to her about losing his sword arm.

Hope leads them, like she knows where her mother is. You trust her judgment, because there’s something eerie about the little girl. It’s like she’s just a little bit more than a demigod, or maybe not more. Maybe it’s more like she’s a little left of a demigod. The troop of veteran demigods follows behind you, but at a distance.

When you enter the coffee shop, Hestia immediately runs to you.

“Mama!” Hope releases your hand and throws open her arms. Her mother sweeps her up in a hug, tears in her eyes. She presses kisses all over Hope’s face before setting her down on the ground.

“I thought you’d abandoned me,” Hestia whispers, crouching down in front of her daughter.

“I’m sorry Mama, but I saw a snake, and it scared me.” Hope knots her hands behind her back and scuffs her blue shoes against the ground.

“A snake?” Hestia looks to you with fear in her eyes, and you can hear that same sound, like wind through the trees. Hissing. Of course Python was too big to just be destroyed like that.

“It’s alright Mama,” Hope says. “I’m not scared anymore. Nico will keep me safe!”

To your surprise, Nico nods, like that’s an easy promise to keep. Then Hope looks to you. “And William Solace too.”

“Are you sure?” Hestia asks, like this little girl is capable of making her own responsible decisions on this matter.

“Nico keeps me safe, and Will keeps Nico safe.” Again you feel that strange shiver looking at Hope, like she’s not really a demigod. Hestia looks at her daughter and softens. Then she stands, and she takes a gold chain front around her neck. There’s a small pendent at the end, a little jar. She holds it out to Nico. He takes it without hesitation.

“I’ll keep her safe, my lady,” he says. Hestia smiles, and then nods like it’s a fact. Like mother, like daughter, you suppose. The moment is somewhat ruined when Nico begins to sway. “I think I’m going to pass out,” he says, and then promptly collapses. You catch him before his head can hit the ground, and then sweep him up in a bridle-style carry. He needs to eat more, you think.

Rachel appears at your side. She gently touches your elbow, drawing your attention away. Her eyes are glassy, far away.

“This is right,” she whispers to you.
“What do you mean?” You’re not sure what’s going on, but it seems profound. Maybe it seems right, you don’t really know.

“This is right, this is what we’re supposed to be doing.” Rachel wraps a hand around your arm, like she could convey her thoughts through touch. Then you remember, you can sort of understand thoughts through touch. You close your eyes, letting your soul open up to hers. It’s a blur of life and color, piecemeal flashes of memory, jumbled together so that what you are left with is something like stained glass. When your own light shines through the window, it leaves the ghost of meaning behind on your tongue.

You open your eyes and sigh.

“We’re undoing the damage that Python did,” you say. “If we’re looking for Apollo we just have to follow the trail that Python has left us as it looks for Dad too.”

The glassy look is gone from Rachel’s eyes. She releases your arm and laughs a little.

... 

The demigods on campus share one of the college apartment buildings. It’s community housing, jokingly called “Greek Life” because they’re dedicated to understanding classics and myths in a modern context. Or at least, that’s their mission statement and what they tell the college their reasoning is. They lend your quest group one of the rooms, and give you free reign of the community kitchen downstairs after you get done explaining what your quest is and what this all means. They retire pretty early, but not without leaving you a few pamphlets for the college and majors. Addie gives you a wink.

“Just in case you make it,” she says, and then she runs off upstairs.

You open our backpack, slipping out Austin’s copy of Keats’ complete works, and flipping to the first of his *Hyperion* fragments. If anyone might be able to give you a clue as to how to battle something you can’t see, it’s Keats. He struggled under the ghost of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, under an unnamed specter, seeking to understand and to shrug it off. You read through the first fragment, and then the second fragment. Austin annotated the margins. His handwriting makes you homesick.

In the first poem all of the Titans lament the fact that the Gods are gaining power, and they in turn are losing it. It ends with Mnemosyne going to Apollo, and delivering her gift of prophesy to him. The second poem is different. Moneta calls Keats into a dream world, like the palace of the first but abandoned. They argue, each missing the other’s meaning. Moneta called Keats part of a dreamer tribe. You’ve always wondered, what that meant.

Were the dreamers the writers, the demigods as a whole, or were they the children of Apollo? Keats wrote of Apollo’s first divinity, the closest moment your family has ever come to capturing what it means to know divine inspiration. Then Keats walks in Apollo’s footsteps, sees the beginning of the First Titan War, the beginning of these trials. Mnemosyne gave Apollo the gift of the oracle, but you know he won that from slaying Python. That’s how the myth goes right? Or maybe he had it first, and that’s why he had to slay Python?

The door to the apartment complex eases open and Nico steps through.

“Hey, you,” you call in to the quiet dark. He jumps, but when he sees it’s only you he joins you at
the table. His backpack is slung over his shoulders. You raise an eyebrow in quiet question. “I thought you were still passed out upstairs?”

“I woke up and remembered that I left my backpack in the forest when I went to get Hope,” he says by way of explanation. You hum, and remember the strange tangle of a conversation that happened in that coffee shop.

“Hey, you probably know better than me. Should we be worried that a virgin goddess has a daughter?” you ask. He laughs at that, stilted and open. His shoulders bounce with the jerking bursts of laughter, as if each sound of happiness has to be yanked out of him. It’s a beautiful picture to you, but you don’t know why he’s laughing. After a moment he seems to catch the confusion on your face.

“Oh, you’re serious. Will, that was Hope,” he says this like it clears up everything. As far as you’re concerned it doesn’t.

“Yes, that’s her name?” you say. Nico looks at you for a few moments.

“Will, that girl wasn’t Hestia's demigod daughter, she was Hope, like the spirit of Hope. During the Battle of Manhattan, Percy was given Pandora’s Pithos and then he gave the pithos to Hestia,” he says.

“I thought it was Pandora’s box?” you ask. Nico groans and rolls his eyes.

“That’s a modern update, people don’t keep things in pithos anymore we keep them in boxes. Anyway, you know the myth; the only spirit to stay in the box was Hope, because she refused to abandon humanity. Percy gave Hestia Hope, because hope flourishes best at the home,” Nico says and then slips the little necklace that Hestia had given him from inside his shirt. The little jar, a pithos, hangs from the end.

“And she gave it to you, because you never give up hope. As long as you have a piece of her, she can’t truly be lost.” It makes perfect sense now. A little piece of you glows with pride and love for him. Of course Nico is the safest place for Hope, not even Tartarus could take her from him.

“I guess,” he mumbles, as a slow flush creeps up to the tip of his ears. He pulls his feet up onto this seat and rests his chin on top of his knees. “What are you reading?”

“Keats’ Hyperion. I’m trying to understand how to beat Python.” You thumb through the pages, as Nico makes a little noise of acknowledgment. Your thoughts from earlier circle your head, about Keats’ ghost walking Apollo’s path, about Apollo receiving his divinity. “Nico, if someone gave you the chance to be a god, would you?”

Something dark worms its way across Nico’s face and he reaches into his boots to pry his knife out.

“I’d tell her to fucking shove it.”

“‘Her’?” You know he can’t be talking about Hestia, you had seen the way he spoke to her. Respect was hard to pull from Nico, but once you had it, it was hard to taint. He looks to his boots, wiggling the knife between his plastic treads and popping out pieces of gravel and dried mud. You try to resist the compulsion to pick up the dirt and throw it away.

“Did I ever tell you that I made Misery laugh?” Nico keeps his eyes trained on his meticulous task.

“I think you mentioned something like that once.” It was part of a story he had told while you raided the camp store in the middle of the night, half-boasting half-mourning his time in Tartarus.
“Do you know what happens when someone is better at something than a god?” he asks.

With *The Fall of Hyperion* sitting heavy in front of you, you cannot deny that you know. Poseidon could take the sea from Oceanus because he had more control over it. Apollo could take the sky from Hyperion, because he had the verse, he was the word, he could make the rules. He could make anything.

“She looked at me and she saw *everything*, every time I fucked up and every grudge and every death and every hurt, and she *laughed*, Will.” His voice is something wretched and introspective. The farther Nico digs the point of his knife into the sole of his shoe the farther his own words dig into his own soul. You wonder where he learned to cut himself down like this. Nico has a face like a god’s, beautiful and ancient, but he wears suffering on it like a hero, open and unending. You can hear his pain radiate through his voice as he throws himself farther and farther into his own darkness. “She said I gave her hope that she wouldn’t be the last immortal when forever was finished and the universe swallowed itself up in its bright white heat death. She—”

“Nico, you gave her hope,” you say. It’s an infinitesimal thing, your kindness. At least when compared to his suffering. Still you hope the difference in perspective is enough to show him how to walk himself out of the pit he’s dug for himself. “You met the Goddess of Misery, and you made her smile. That’s a miracle. No wonder Hestia and Hope love you so much.”

Nico looks at you, letting his knife’s ministrations cease. His whole face goes slack with disbelief, and then he huffs out an unbelieving breath. You would call it a laugh, but it’s too faint for that.

“Look at you, literal fucking sunshine,” he says as he shakes his head. His eyes pick you apart, like he’s really trying to understand how that’s possible.

“I try my best,” you say with a shrug. Whatever he sees, he must like, because his searching look eases away and he tucks his knife away into his boot.

“Yeah.” His words are so soft and so fond that they nearly makes your heart break. You love him.

…

You all hop on a bus at the front of the school the next morning after receiving an unreasonable number of meal bars and chip bags. College kids apparently have a lot of that stuff. The bus takes you into Pittsburg where you encounter a pair of *empousa* that Nico quickly dispatches in an alleyway by your bus stop. Rachel insists that you need to head more south, so you get another bus to Louisville. The ride is about six and a half hours. You spend most of the time reading, Rachel spends it drawing and Nico spends it sleeping. Tension winds up your spine as the hours and countryside rush by outside your window. Nothing happens, no monsters. You can’t help but feel like this is some sort of trick.

An hour outside of Louisville the bus pulls over to get gas. You hop out to stretch your legs and Nico follows right after, although you were pretty sure that he was asleep when the bus stopped. Maybe he sensed shitty fast food, and that woke him up. You really hope he wasn’t just pretending to be asleep. He needs to conserve his strength more than anyone else.

This far south the summer heat rolls off of the pavement in shimmering waves. Cicadas screeched in nearby trees, echoing back and forth. As you head into the gas station for something to eat that’s not
a meal bar or a bag of chips you become hyper aware of just how far away from home you are. You have no real idea where Louisville is. Logically you know it’s in Kentucky, but emotionally this place could be literally anywhere else south of the Mason-Dixon line and you’d probably feel the same about it. Since you don’t travel you’ve never had that feeling of voyeurism that comes with stepping foot in a different place. It’s both immediately othering and a little thrilling. You’re in an unknown place, and so by virtue of its unknowability, anything could happen. Great and terrible things await you.

You realize, as you stare at the slushy machine, that this is what it must’ve felt like to be a hero back when the first legends walked the earth. You also think that you should feel stupid for having a thought like that in front of a gas station slushy machine, but somehow the metamorphoses of the mundane into the magical is exactly where this feeling springs from.

“Hey Nico.” Nico is staring at the slushy machine with a lot more intensity than you are, which is saying something considering the emotional journey you just experienced. Maybe he's actually interested in getting one.

“Hmm?”

“You do this traveling thing a lot, right? Does it always feel like this?” You take in a deep breath. It smells like pollen and gasoline and potential. (You might say love, if you weren’t half a coward, and if you weren’t wholly afraid of sounding like a hypocrite with your unspoken feelings still stewing behind your lips and whatnot.)

Nico looks over at you out of the corner of his eye, before slipping out a cup from the stack that is big enough to makes his hands look like a child’s. He chooses whatever flavor blue is.

“It’s different with people, and on a quest. It’s not as relaxing but I also don’t spend as much time thinking. In way, it’s just a lot more you know? There are higher highs and lower lows.” He snaps on a lid and then heads towards the counter where he stands without talking to the cashier. When he notices that you didn’t follow him he trudges over and glowers at you.

“Come on,” he says. You snag a bag of pre-made chicken fingers and potato wedges from the heated food display and follow him over. He pushes a dollar and fifty cents into your hand when you start to ring up your stuff, and indicates his slushy in your order too. The guy takes your money, and nods at the exact change, before the both of you scurry out into the sunlight.

“You know, talking to service people is a valuable adult skill,” you say, plopping down on the curb and munching on your bad gas station fast food. Nico sits on the curbside to your right with his knees popped up.

“I’m the ghost king,” he replies, “I don’t need valuable adult skills.” He then takes a petulant sip of his slushy.

“Hey ghost king, I think I’ve got a perfect job for you,” Rachel says as she saddles up next to you two. Nico takes another petulant sip of his slushy, like he already doesn’t like where this is going. Rachel sits down on his right and flashes her sketchbook.

Over and over again she’s drawn the same old schoolhouse, tall and dark. It’s front door yawns like the maw of some terrific beast. Grass presses up through the cracks in the foundation, made all the more decrepit by the sweet yellow face of a dandelion blooming against the grey. Windows are cracked and boarded or else they’re fogged over with grime and half-melted, as glass tends to become with time. The interior is stretched with the shadows of covered furniture, and the thin white traces of what might be curtains or might be ghosts. Nico takes a look at the photo and then makes an
interested humming noise.

“Oh, you meant real ghosts,” he says.

“Yeah,” Rachel says, like that should be obvious. Nico glares at her.

“Most demigods wouldn’t know a real ghost if it bit them, forgive me for being a little skeptical,” he gripes. Rachel rolls her eyes. Not for the first time, you’re glad she’s so unflappable. You know Nico is not soft, he has points and edges. He’s something you have to handle with caution and care, lest you hurt yourself. You can tell that Rachel knows that. Maybe she knows that even better than you.

“So,” you ask, “where are we headed?”

...

The schoolhouse is located a mile down a dirt road, into the middle of nowhere. It is exactly as creepy as you would imagine a haunted house to be. The fact that it’s daytime only barely lessens the eerie, faintly damp, feel inside and the faint creaking of the whole building. This whole thing would be a lot easier if you could just burn the school to the ground, and then find the weird ghosts things. It would feel remarkably less like a horror movie, and you would not feel the need to scream every time the wind blew.

“I hate this,” you whisper.

“Then you would hate the Underworld,” Nico says, kicking in a door and peering into the room. The only thing there is a cloud of dust where the rush of hair had displaced years of buildup. You make a faint noise of disgust.

Nico sighs and shakes his head. “We need to split up, this is taking too long. If it gets too dark, you and Rachel will have to wait outside, and I’ll have to do it on my own,” he says.

“What why?” you ask.

“Neither of you can see in the dark,” he says. You pause.

“Wait, can you see in the dark?” That would make sense considering that one of Hades’ elements was darkness, and Nico could see when they were shadow traveling. Still, it is kind of weird. Also a little cute. The fact that he can see in the dark kind of reminds you of a cat.

“Focus, Will,” he says.

“I am focused that seems like a very important-”

“Go check out the gym. Rachel, you finish up these rooms. I’ll start upstairs,” he says. Rachel nods and then gives him a campy salute before kicking down another random door on the hallway. Most of these rooms aren’t locked but you assume it feels pretty badass to kick in a door.

“This is how we all die in a horror movie,” you tell him. Nico looks back with a blank, and quite frankly, annoyed look.

“That means nothing to me. I’ve never seen a horror movie,” he says. You would balk, but it occurs to you a second later, that Nico literally lived with ghosts for a while, so the idea of seeing one on
screen probably didn’t appeal to him. Nor did anything involving gratuitous violence or torture, especially after Tartarus.

“I’m just saying. You’re sending me to my death,” you say. Nico just turns and starts for the stairs.

“Scream if you find anything,” he says.

...

You consider getting ‘Nico this is your fault’ put on your grave stone. But of course, there is no one around for you to tell that too. If there were, you wouldn’t be in so much trouble.

Since kicking in doors seemed like so much fun you decided to try it out on the doorway in the gymnasium doorway. Lo and behold, the one place you were sent is the one place that has not one, not two, but three evil lady spirits who are going to suck out your soul and leave your shriveled body on the super gross, dusty floor of a gym no one has been to in centuries.

One of them lies across the floor and wails.

You, in turn, scream.

The ghost then starts and sits up, before screaming back at you, which delves into a horrific back and forth screaming match.

“That’s enough, shut up!” One of the other horrifying evil lady spirits shouts. She is pacing along the sideline, like she’s watching an invisible basketball game happening and she is not pleased with how her team is playing. Your mouth shuts with an audible click, and the screaming ghost, slouches back to the floor.

You continue to stand there, dumbstruck. Then you’re a little peevish, because didn’t Nico just tell you to scream if you needed something? You’re not sure exactly what you need, but you definitely need something. You just screamed a lot and had this been an immediately life or death situation, you would be dead. And it’d be his fault.

Technically it would be your fault because you kicked in the door instead of sneaking around like a smart person, but you brush that part aside, as you come to the realization that the ghosts aren’t really doing anything. They’re just kind of walking around the gym. Or sitting. Or lying down on the floor. They don’t even float.

Each of the ghosts wears a white dress that hangs on their body in tatters. Their hair hangs limp and knotted from what were once complicated braids and beautiful pins. Black streaks run from their eyes, as if they had cried away their makeup. The longer and longer you look at them, the less they look like horror movie creatures and the more they look like . . . Like girls who had a really shitty night at prom.

“I’m sorry for all the screaming, but can I . . . Can I help you in some way?” you ask. The one who had shouted at you to shut up lifts her head and scoffs. She starts to walk towards you, taking slow measured steps across the gym floor.

“That’s rich coming from a demigod. How will you help us? Seduce us and then leave? Steal a valuable artifact? Kill one of our pets?” she hisses. At the mention of pets you look around you, and
while you don’t see anything that could kill you, you put yourself on guard a little bit. However, you now know, just by those lists of things, that these girls are either spirits or minor gods, which is good to know.

“No actually, I can’t really do any of those things because I’m super gay, you don’t look like you have anything valuable on you, and I suck with a sword so . . .” You shuffle your feet in the dust a little bit as the girl who had screamed snorts a laugh. The one you’re talking to sneers at her. Instead of balking, the girl who had screamed just sighs.

“Oh come on Thalia, that was funny,” she says.

“Euthymia, be quiet,” Thalia snaps back. Euthymia stands up from where she was lying on the floor and marches over to Thalia.

“Don’t tell me to be quiet-”

“It’s useless-”

“I’m so tired of you-”

The only ghost who hasn’t said anything at this point gets up from where she was seated on the bleachers and slowly makes her way over to the other girls. Then she just sits down on the floor and watches them bicker.

“Um, sorry to interrupt,” you cut in, “but what are you doing here?”

Thalia gives Euthymia a hard look, but Euthymia just turns up her nose and marches over to you. In a fit of resigned frustration Thalia marches over to the bleachers and crosses her arms over her chest.

“We’re supposed to go to a wedding,” Euthymia explains, “But we can’t dance.”

You stare back at her for a moment before nodding slowly.

“Have you considered going to the wedding and just . . . not dancing?” you try. This, as it turns out, was not the right thing to say, because Thalia leans forward and says “Ha!” in a very self-satisfied way. Euthymia looks helplessly at her sister before turning back to you.

“No you see there’s . . . there’s no music!” she tries again, wringing her hands. You’re not entirely sure what dancing has to do with your ultimate dad-saving mission, but this is a weird situation, and in your experience weird situations tend to be divine in some way or another.

“So just make music,” you say. Euthymia tears up and begins to wail, while Thalia shrinks a little bit. Her self-satisfied smile withers as she watches Euthymia grow more and more distressed.

“You can’t just make music!” Euthymia cries. You’re not sure exactly what is wrong, because you definitely can make music, even if it’s just tapping your foot or singing off key. You look to the third girl, the one who is still unnamed. She nodded to you, and then make a gesture like ‘keep going.’ With as much charm as you can muster, you turn back to Euthymia.

“Oh on the contrary,” you say, doing your best to flash her a bright and confident smile, “I happen to know you can.” Euthymia pauses for a moment, and gives you a suspicious look.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“I’m a son of Apollo, we specialize in making music,” you say. Euthymia’s whole face lights up, as
in she actually begins to glow. It’s so bright, that you have to look away.

“Euthymia!” Thalia shouts, popping up from her spot on the bleachers, “Be careful with your divine form.”

Euthymia giggles a little bit, and you can feel her glow dimming against your skin.

“Sorry, I’m just-” she breaks out into another giggle, and you decide that it’s alright to open your eyes and turn back around. Her hair has righted itself somewhat, back into neater braids, and the hem of her dress has also sewed itself back together. There’s a blue blush to the fabric now too.

Ah, you think, I get it now. They forgot their divinity.

“Sorry, Thalia, it’s just . . . It’s him Thalia, the one-”

Thalia slaps a hand over Euthymia’s mouth. You look back between the two of them, but Thalia only glowers at you.

“What was she-” you begin, but Thalia cuts in.

“First, make music. Then we’ll tell you what we know,” she says. Well then, that seems like an alright trade to you.

“Have either of you ever heard the song, “Old Time Rock and Roll?’” you ask. Both look at you like you’re crazy, but then you feel a tug on your shirt hem and look over to find the third ghost. Up close it’s very clear that she’s the youngest of the bunch, at maybe fourteen. Her dress sweeps the floor, and as you look down at her she lifts the hem of her dress to reveal a pair of white socks, with her toes wiggling inside. She gives you a sly smile.

“Perfect,” you say.

. . .

You’re well past sliding and singing (and dodging the girls as they insist you take off your pants to make your Tom Cruise impression authentic) when Nico and Rachel come bursting into the room, frantic and breathing hard.

Nico locks eyes with you and makes a b-line across the gym floor, sword drawn.

“Nico!” you shout, running to him and smiling, so he knows nothing is wrong, because you’ve seen that look before. That look is ‘the queen of monsters has Will by his throat’ or ‘there’s an empousa right behind you, Will, duck.’ Rachel hangs back inside the doorway, and takes stock of the room.

“You screamed?” Nico says as he notices your smile and tries to reconcile it with what he knows. You lean down a little, so you can duck into his gaze, and make him focus on you.

“Yeah, that was like twenty minutes ago, man,” you say with a little laugh. He frowns, still breathing hard.

“Sorry, we . . . There were actual ghosts, spirits of demigods who died during the civil war, it was . . .” He trails off, staring at the girls behind you.

“Oh, you got rid of those ghosts? That’s great! Man those guys were assholes,” Thalia says brightly before swinging the youngest around in a circle.
“What are they?” Nico asks, low and forceful.

“I don’t know, but their names are Euthymia, Thalia and . . . Wait.” You cup your hands around your mouth and call out to the girls. “What’s the youngest one’s name again?”

Thalia sets her down on the ground for a second, enough to let the girl call out, “Aglaea!”

“Aglaea,” you finish. Nico sighs something like relief, and shoves his sword back into his sheath.

“The Graces,” he says after a while, “they’re the three Graces.”

Oh, well, that’s good to know you suppose. You’re still not entirely sure how you’re going to solve this situation, but that seems like a good place to start. Nico frowns a little, and then asks, “Where is that music coming from?” Oh right, you remember, there’s music playing.

“I don’t know, after we sang ‘Pretty Woman’ it just started to play on its own, I think I might have accidentally created it?” That should concern you more than it actually does. “Hey, come dance with us!” you insist. You’ve long since kicked off your sandals, and it wouldn’t kill him to lose the boots.

“I don’t dance,” Nico says.

“Neither do they, that’s the magic to it,” you say, dragging him to the center with the girls. You can see Rachel come into gym through your periphery, and make her way towards the bleachers.

“I have two left feet,” Nico says.

“Then lose the shoes, I’m sure they’re just weighing you down.” Nico scowls at you, but kneels down onto the floor to untie his laces.

Euthymia sweeps up to the two of you, and perches on your shoulder to whisper in your ear.

“Fitzwilliam Solace,” she says. You start and whip around to her, as the name brings back months of strangeness. Euthymia doesn’t lose her smile the whole time, but there’s something . . . uncanny about it. It’s like she’s not really smiling, that’s just how her face is set.

“That’s what she called you,” Euthymia says. On the ground beside you Nico has gone very, very still. He stands and puts himself in front of you in one fluid motion. You catch his wrist as he moves his hand to his sword. You press a careful hand against his wrist, urging him to calm down. Nico looks at you out of the corner of his eye, and then backs off a little.

“What’s her name?” you ask. Euthymia shakes her head.

“We don’t know. She and our Lady Aphrodite, they’re of the same ilk you know, sisters of a sort,” she says. “She told us she would be missing the wedding, but to look out for you. Oh, and, beware of doves,” she says. Then she sweeps off again out to dancing around with her sisters.

All of their dresses have mended, and are now a pretty baby blue. Their hair is perfectly pinned, and they all seem to have no cares in the world. You have the sensation again that what you’re watching is very uncanny. Maybe that’s just what it's like to see gods.

“Do I still have to dance?” Nico asks. You bump his shoulder with your own.

“Definitely,” you say.
You lose track of time as you teach Nico how to match rhythms, and the history of rock and roll. Then suddenly Thalia shouts that they’re going to be late, absolutely late, they have to go now.

“Go where?” Nico asks. Thalia rolls her eyes.

“The wedding of course!” she says, like she can’t really believe there’s anyone who doesn’t know about the wedding, before bolting for the door. Along the way she snags a pair of blue heels that definitely hadn’t been there before.

“Of course,” you mime, earning a snicker of Nico. Rachel, to your surprise runs out after the girls.

“Wait, are we going too?” you call, she stops long enough to turn and look at you.

“Well of course!” she shouts. You and Nico run after her. Outside there’s an old pickup truck, painted a dusty red color. You know for a fact that wasn’t there when you went into the gym. Rachel and Thalia hop into the cab, while Nico, Euthymia, Aglaea, and you all pile into the bed.

“Are we going to be alright crashing a wedding for the gods?” you ask the girls. Euthymia giggles, and shakes her head.

“Don’t be silly, you’re not crashing. You’re our plus ones,” she says. You look at Nico out of the corner of your eye, and he just shrugs.

“Well you’re not going to be okay dressed like that,” Aglaea says in return. She snaps her fingers, and your camp shirt and sandals and shorts all stretch and change color, until you’re wearing a brand new, black suit with a blue vest, and a pink carnation in your breast pocket. You look over to see that Nico is wearing a matching outfit, and a look of abject disgust. You can’t help but laugh, as the car roars to life and peels out of the abandoned school parking lot. Nico reaches over and swats your arm. You swat him back, and then it’s not long before you’re both wrestling, ruining your perfectly good monkey suits while the two Graces shriek and laugh.

Rachel insists you stop at a bar just past the Kentucky border, butted up against an old levy that you expect was at one time keeping back a river. Now there’s nothing but the sagging wood building of the bar and dry concrete. Rachel shoves you inside with vague instructions. The lights inside hang low from the ceiling. The little pops of neon sign here and there cast multicolored splotches across the dark wood floor. No one stops you as you head up to the bar, but the barkeep eyes you in a way that lets you know he doesn’t believe you’re of legal age for a second.

As per Rachel’s instructions you walk up to a man in an ugly Hawaiian shirt and smile.

“Momus right?” you ask. He looks up at you and then sneers.

“Piss off half-blood, I’m not in the mood,” he says into a glass of amber liquid.

You try not to get to frustrated, but make him mad or laugh, are not great instructions, especially
when this guy is . . . clearly not in the mood to laugh. So, that probably means you’re going for angry.

“I’ll only be a minute, you see I’ve come all the way here to tell you that uh, you’re being fired as the God of Satire, and I’m replacing you,” you say. Momus turns and blinks at you.

“Ex-fucking-scuse me?” he bites out. Then he takes a closer look at you and snorts, “Oh yeah, you’ll replace me. This’ll be the day I die.”

“Yeah, you know, the gods think I’m pretty hot shit as far as satire goes. You know I write South Park,” you say. Momus slams his fist on the table, making you jump.

“South Park is not real satire!” he shouts. The force of it is divine, ratting the sports memorabilia on the walls and the glasses set on their shelves. You grimace a little bit.

“Uh well, it’s not like you’ve done anything recently, so . . .” you say. Momus breathes heavy, then he downs the rest of his glass in a second.

“I’ll show you satire,” he says.

. . .

One standup routine and half a bottle of whiskey later, you haul Momus into the back of the pickup truck, where he passes out in a ball. Looking at his pitiful state makes you feel mildly better about the enormous hit to your pride you took as Momus satirized you.

“How’d it go?” Nico asks.

“If I hear one more pun involving the Hippocratic Oath and hypocrisy, I’m going to cry,” you say, collapsing into the bed of the truck at Nico’s side. He pats your head in a strangely nice gesture.

Then he says, “there, there, you giant pansy.”

Why do I love you again? you wonder.

Then Nico smiles down at you.

Oh right, yeah.

. . .

Every fifty miles or so Rachel has the truck pull over, and another minor god collected, until the pickup truck has to be magically upgraded into a bus, and you’re ninety percent sure you’re bringing at least half the wedding party. Rachel stays up at the front, talking to the minor gods and spirits and the four Satyrs you found hitchhiking outside of Nashville.

If you’re being honest it gets a little bit much to handle, especially because the gods don’t run out of energy. You sneak to the back of the bus, where there’s a bench that’s wide enough for you to
spread out your reading materials, and far enough away that you have some semblance of quiet.

Even then you don’t get much done, considering what mess this whole quest is. It feels like with every new thing you read, you understand less and less about how to find your father, and what kind of state he’s going to be in, or how you’re going to return him to Olympus. You’re trying to see if this has happened before, and you think it has, but how do you look for that? You’re in dire need of assistance.

“What are you doing?” Nico asks as another day on the road falls into night. He hovers at the end of your bench, looking down at your mess.

“Studying . . .” you say, as you hastily shuffle your papers into some semblance of neatness so that he can sit down too. After he does, he sits there and stares at you, like he knows there’s something else you want to say. It takes you a while to work it up. Frustration, by its nature, is not an easy thing to talk about.

“Gods, I wish I were an Athena kid right now,” you say. “I’m no good with this kind of puzzle solving. Matching, finding holes, going from one thing to the next, that’s easy. I just . . . I don’t know where I’m supposed to start. I always kind of ignored the cabin history stuff. I don’t even know what I’m looking for! How do you find evidence of silence?” You feel stupid and weak saying something like this. Rachel chose you for this quest, so you’ve got to prove that you can, and you know you can, it’s just . . . hard. Nico doesn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry,” you say after a while.

“Don’t be sorry. This is crazy, all right? I grew up with ghosts, and I think this whole quest is crazy.” He pries his boots off and then tucks one leg up on the bench.

“Yeah, but I should—I should be able to fix this, I should be able to find and answer if I had just-”

“You’re too hard on yourself,” he speaks definitively, as sure as death.

“I’m not, it’s just . . . Nico, I know I can do such great thing, amazing things. Sometimes I look at how far I’ve come and how hard I worked, and I feel so much hope, because if I could do that than imagine how much more I’m capable of. It’s amazing, and I know I can figure this out, and fix this, but I just . . .” You just don’t know what you’re doing right now.

“When you do surgery, do you always look back and think about the first time you were on your own, how he died?” he asks, and you start. That’s a low blow.

“No, of course not, I’ve . . . I just think about saving them,” you insist, because this is a fundamental part of you, and if one thing will always be true, it’s that you do your job to the best of your abilities. Nico puts his foot back on the floor before turning to look you dead in the eye. His face is serious, but not hard.

He says, “Sometimes when I get . . . down, and people try to talk to me about it they think that all I can focus on is how bad everything is, but it’s not necessarily like that. It’s more like, I can only think about how good things used to be, and how they’re not like that anymore, and they can’t be like that ever again. But I’m starting to learn how things can still be good, in different ways. It just takes time, sometimes, and I know you probably don’t want to hear it because it doesn’t feel like we have time, but we do. You do.” He looks down at his knotted hands and you do too. You follow the path of his thumb as it presses over his scars and fresher cuts.

This boy saw the world fall apart during World War II, when his sister died, during the Titan war,
during the Giant War, and now he's watching it fall apart again. If there’s anyone in the world qualified to tell you to wait, it would be him. You would find his insistence on patience a little hypocritical, considering he’s always fighting like every moment could be his last, but maybe it’s the opposite. Maybe he fights so hard, and is so ready to risk everything, because he knows that worlds end, and you don’t get through it by sitting still. That’s how he waits, he keeps surviving.

You reach across the little divide, and put your hand over his. His hand is not cold, but it is not warm either. Nico lets you take his hand and turn it over without any fight, and without any cringing. You swipe your thumb over his pulse, and it’s enough to tell you that he is still so dark inside. But maybe you’re not looking at this the right way. Maybe he’ll always have the shadows, but you know for a fact now, that there’s also a warmth, and a light inside of him.

You look up, and Nico catches your eye. He tries to give you a little smile. It feels strange to be the one getting taken care of, but you think you could get used to it.

“You’ll get there, Will,” he says as you wrap your hand around his. Nico pauses, staring down at your linked hands as if he can’t quite understand what he’s looking at. You give his hand a little squeeze, and his eyes snap up to you. Pink rises on his cheeks, and his mouth wobbles in something that might be a smile and might be a grimace. Then he nods.

“If you know you can do it, then you can,” Nico says.

He sits there, fidgeting on the seat with your linked hands lying on the seat between you. Then he scooches over to your side and looks over your shoulder, at the book you left in your lap and your messy doctor scrawl. His body is warm and solid where it leans against your own. You can feel the heavy thump of your heart as it picks up speed. “Tell me about what you’ve learned so far,” he says.

“Have you ever heard of the song American Pie?”, you ask, tapping the page where it rests in the little book Austin had complied for you. Nico raises an eyebrow at you before looking back down at the book.

“No, but of course some asshole out there wrote a song called ‘American Pie’ that’s such an American thing to do,” he says. His hand squeezes yours a little, and you smile.

“Hey, don’t trash talk Don McLean, he was a child of Apollo, and a very awesome singer. Anyway his song American Pie might have been an epic prophesy predicting the Titan and Giant war and what comes next, like what we should be doing, or it might be total gibberish. It’s hard to tell,” you say. He worked on it for ages, The Book tells you as much. There are scraps of it, things he wrote while he was still at camp, scribbled into notebook pages, and the margins of other songs he was looking at. Some of the stuff is hard to make out, since you’re looking at scanned pages, and Don McLean didn’t really have good handwriting to begin with.

“Could it be both?” Nico asks. You nod.

“It could definitely be both. Like here, listen: ‘and while the king was looking down, the jester stole his thorny crown. The courtroom was adjourned, no verdict was returned.’ Doesn’t that sound like what happened at the beginning of the Titan war, when Luke stole the lightning bolt and Hades’ helm, and they waited to vote on whether or not they should kill Percy?’” There’s even a doodle in the margins of a lightning bolt, but then again, that’s an easy thing to doodle. Nico just shrugs against your shoulder.

“I don’t know I wasn’t around then,” he says. You sigh, and shakes your head.
“Ah, I’m probably just crazy. Don McLean left so many notes behind for his chapter in The Book, and Austin went through all the trouble of scanning them for me. I think maybe I’m going crazy trying to find something,” you say. Still you can’t help but laugh at yourself a little bit. Just the sound of it, Don McLean: American Prophet, is absurd. Nico eyes you. Maybe he’s making sure that you’re not going to get all dejected again. Then he settles more firmly against your side, and rests his head against your shoulder.

“You should sing more,” he says. You look down at him as best you can.

“Really?” you ask.

“You have a nice voice,” he replies. You hum an acknowledgement of his statement, and think about how much you wish you could send a message back to your past self. If you could tell him one thing, you have no doubt that you would just brag. You’re not entirely sure what exactly this means for your relationship with Nico, but you know trying to ask Nico right now would be the wrong thing to do. He’s skittish by nature and this sort of thing must be big to him. If you were to bring it up he might get flustered and that’s the last thing you want. You want to cherish this moment.

So, you lean your head back and sing.

“A long, long, time ago, I can still remember, how that music used to make me smile . . .”

Chapter End Notes

Ha, joke’s on you, you all thought this was a PJO fanfic, but it’s really just Don McLean fanfiction. What’s that? The main couple was holding hands and low-key cuddling?? I’m sorry, you must be confused. That's all just metaphorical, everything is always about American Pie. Always.

Anyway, Next Episode: ever wonder what the deal with that fucking dove was? Hint: it’s an asshole
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I haven't updated this since August what the hell. On the bright side, I'm not dead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You all pull over for a pit stop six miles north of Nashville. You know for a fact that Gods don’t need to eat, but they all seem convinced that they need fries and milkshakes, so you and Nico and Rachel end up at a picnic table pretending that you don’t know them.

It’s kind of hard because every once and a while one of them jumps up onto a table and shouts at you, but for the most part, you’re able to hide away from their nonsense. The conversation meanders, as its want to, to music.

“I’ve never been very good at singing,” Rachel says, sighing. “Although I did sing in a church choir, back when my dad used to bother dragging me to church. How about you, Nico?” she asks. Nico gives a short shake of his head.

“Not at all?” you ask, taking a quick sip of your soda. He pauses, looks at you with a withering eye, and then concedes.

“A bit. But I don’t like to do it anymore,” he says. Rachel perks up.

“Why not?” she asks. You appreciate that she asked. Your own curiosity was not quite as strong as your fear of dredging up an unpleasant past.

“I only know old songs,” he says, in a vague though final way that you decide to leave well alone.

... 

You make three more stops, and pick up three more minor gods. At this rate, you’re pretty sure you’re never going to make it to the wedding.

... 

At a rundown motel near the border of Texas, you have nearly reached your wit’s end. The bed spread looks like it was made from your mother’s curtains, but there’s a strange dark patch in the corner of it that you’re afraid to touch. Everything smells like cigarettes and booze, and a heavy, damp something else. In the corner, the god Morpheus rocks back and forth.
“Chase all the clouds from the sky back to the days of—”

“You already sang that one,” he mutters, as he continues his rocking. His eyes droop low as you put your head in your hands. You have effectively run out of all the lullabies that you and Rachel know, but he’s so close to falling asleep. Nico taps you on the shoulder. You look up, but he doesn’t say anything, just looks over at Morpheus and sighs.

Then he opens his mouth.

And your mind goes blank.

“Che bella cosa e’ na giornata ’e sole
n’aria serena dopo na tempesta.
Pe’ ll’aria fresca pare già na festa
Che bella cosa e’ na giornata ’e sole.
Ma n’atu sole,
cchiù bello, oje ne’
’O sole mio
sta ’nfronte a te.”

He sings, low and soft, with a delicate croon that is not so much polished as it is earnest. He seems to sing from the pit of his heart, and as he does so Morpheus’ eyes begin to shutter closed. There’s a bright quality to the words that makes you think the song ought to be sung faster, but Nico continues, as if it were a lullaby, or an aubade. Soon, Morpheus’ grip on the waken world slackens and he slips into a sweet, heavy slumber. You look over at Nico, and you can feel your heartbeat in your fingertips. The words of the song make rounds in your head, circling back and forth although their meaning is unintelligible. They are made all the more dear to you because the words are sung in his voice. It takes you a few seconds to notice that Nico has stopped singing, a few more to notice that he is waiting for you to say something. His mouth wobbles a little bit, as if he were trying very hard to keep from betraying some sort of emotion.

He has slipped his knife from his boot and is using it to pick at the dirt underneath his nails.

“That was beautiful,” you say. Your voice shakes a little bit with low intensity. Nico glances over to you out of the corner of his eye.

“It’s an old song my mom used to sing to me. In English, it’s called ‘My sun,’” he says. You swallow and nod.

“It’s an old song my mom used to sing to me. In English, it’s called ‘My sun,’” he says. You swallow and nod.

“You’re . . . You’re a great singer. You give me a run for my money,” you say, with a smile that feels dull compared the extent of feeling built up in your chest. He glances at you out of the corner of his eye again, and he frowns a little bit.

“I don’t like singing,” he says. As you nod, you swear you can see the ghosts he’s always carrying, hovering over his shoulder. You wonder if Bianca ever sang those songs to him too, after his mother died.

“Okay,” you say. Nico nods, before he shoves the knife into his boot. He walks over to Morpheus
and slings his sleeping form over his shoulder. He is able to heft Morpheus up with much more ease than a fifteen-year-old boy should be able to do. Well, that’s a soldier for you.


The next time the bus stops, it’s in the middle of what appears to be nowhere. You look out the window at the rolling hills and wonder what minor god you’re going to have to collect this time. The rest of the bus cheers, and then all of the minor gods are glowing. Their daily clothes fall away to reveal three piece suits, and floor length gowns. One of the nymphs reveals a white dress that has the wedding goddesses gasping.

“Don’t you dare,” Aglaea hisses. The nymph looks like she’s about to argue, when Thalia comes to loom behind her youngest sister. Instead the nymph just purses her lips and her dress blushes a pretty pink.

“Happy?” she asks. Aglaea smiles.

“Delighted.” Then Agalea turns to Rachel and hums, pressing a finger to her lips. “Oh that won’t due, here!”

With a snap of her fingers Rachel is twirled up in a simple blue sheath with gold embroidered roses at the shoulder. After a moment of consideration Rachel nods, and says thank you. Then she turns over her shoulder and waves to you. Nico gets up first, and shimmies his way along the isle. As he passes, Agalea snaps her fingers and freshens up the wrinkled and bloodstained suit he’d been running around in for takes.

You take a moment to gather all of your things before you follow them. One of the pages slips through your fingers, a copy of a Homeric hymn about Python. It was an old and confused thing that often conflated the word for ‘prophet’ and ‘Python’ so that it sometimes sounded like there were two snakes. Your eyes linger, for a moment.

“Will, come on, the wedding will start without you!” Rachel calls.

“Wedding?” you mumble, looking out the window.

Somewhere along the way the wedding had lost what tremulous reality it held to begin with, but now, as you look out the window of the bus, glowing white pavilions rise out of the earth, wrapped in old ivory and brilliant pink roses. A veritable forest of seats sit on either side of a wide, petal covered isle that ends in an arch of pink roses. You whistle, long and low, before grabbing your backpack and throwing it over your shoulder.

“Hey wait up!” you call, running after her. Agalea snaps her fingers as you pass, and all your clothes get a little stiffer.


If you thought that the bus was rowdy and crowded, it has nothing on a god’s wedding. Nothing can compare to the sea of bodies that rolls on before you. There aren’t even any of the major gods here, and the place is packed. A satyr in a bow-tie takes your backpack. A nymph in a slinky silver dress
gives you a glass of ambrosia that sparkles like champagne. You put it down on the nearest surface. The last thing you need is to get tipsy among divines.

“William Solace!” Euthymia says, putting her arm through yours. “I have a friend to introduce you to.”

Nico steps up to your side. Even though the girls made him change into a suit, he keeps a sword at his side. It looks anachronistic in a way that the aviator jacket and ripped jeans never did. His eyes are hard on Euthymia. In return Euthemia smiles wide, and bright, and not quite sincere.

“You can all come,” she says.

She leads you through the crowds and across a wooden dancefloor, crawling with wedding hands that are scrambling to finish their setups. At a table near the edge, two gods sit in quiet conference. One has dark black hair, brown eyes, and a sharpness to his features that reminds you of Nico. The other has dark black hair as well, but there’s something softer, and a little bit more mischievous about his face. There’s something familiar about his face as well, and after a second you place it. He looks like the senior boy you had a crush on, back when you first joined theater your Freshman year of high school. He was straight, and the whole thing had kind of blown up in your face.

As you approach the table, Nico stops dead in his tracks. His eyes are narrowed and bright. The hand that always rests on his sword hilt tightens until his knuckles glow white. You stop as well, to ask what’s wrong, but Euthymia pulls at your arm. The second she does, Nico snatches your free arm, holding you back. Their eyes lock, and for a brief second, you can feel the tension build up to snap. His unflinching sneer in the face of a god scares you.

The one who looks like Nico stands up and opens his mouth as if he’s about to say something, but the other beats him to it.

“Oh, come on Nico, look at me! Do you really think I’d still look like Percy if I were Eros? Or have you not moved on?” he asks, dropping his head into his hand with a sigh. Nico’s mouth drops open, and his face flushes with bright pink blotches. Around Nico’s feet the earth blackens, and the grass withers. You can feel the way his death aura leaks unconsciously from his body.

“Himeros!” the other one hisses, smacking Himeros across the back of his head. He looks up with wide and pleading eyes. “Will, Nico, please sit down. Ignore him.”

“Oh sure, ignore me. No one ever wants me,” Himeros whines, laying his head down on the table.

“He’s not usually like this, it’s just, it’s my wedding and he’s-” The other god looks at Nico and winces, but Nico just scowls in return. He tugs your hand, pulling you back a little bit more. Euthymia’s smile grows wider.

Her eyes are not smiling.

Then Himeros lifts his head from the table and makes direct eye contact with Nico.

“I’m the god of what, Anteros?” he asks. Anteros looks nervously between the two of them.

“Himeros, please, things are bad enough with-”

“Unrequited love,” Nico says. Anteros’ eyes grow wide. You feel that you have had enough of this strange back and forth. They’ll only wound each other going in circles like this. You squeeze Nico’s hand. He glances at you out of the corner of his eye.
“Okay,” he says. He does not let go of your hand, but Euthymia does let go of your arm.

“Have fun,” she says, before waltzing back to the crowd and disappearing among a flurry of taffeta and laugher.

“Please sit down, let me introduce myself. My name is Anteros, and this is my wedding!” he says, gesturing around him, as if by some miracle you could have missed this whole production. His smile is wide, though his eyes look tired.

“Congratulations,” you say. You have to yank on Nico’s hand to draw him closer to the table. He is still giving Himeros ugly looks, though Himeros seems to have gotten bored with Nico. The words Anteros had said finally process for you. When Nico looks at him, he sees Percy, thinks of Percy, maybe misses Percy. It pricks your heart, but a moment later this eases. After all, he’s unrequited right? Which means that Nico’s probably over Percy . . . right?

You take a seat at the table and put on your best polite smile. You’ll be damned if you let your old curse come writhing to the surface where love gods can see.

“I wanted to thank you personally for helping the girls, the wedding goddesses. Hymen would have-”

“I’m sorry what?” you ask.

“Oh! That’s right, my fiancé is Hymen, you know, god of weddings. It’s kind of funny it’s taken us this long, but well with the laws in America, and you know how long it takes to plan a wedding-”

“Your husband’s name is Hymen?” you ask. He blinks at you, and cocks his head to the side, before his eyes go wide.

“Not like—or well— I mean yes like that, the hymen is named after him, but it’s not . . . I forgot that you were a doctor,” he says at long last. Nico looks at you and frowns.

“What’s a hymen?” he asks. Himeros bursts into rancorous laugher, his fist pounding on the table. For a second you think Nico must be joking. Then you remember that there wouldn’t have been sex—ed in the 1940s and he would never have looked up that stuff on his own considering he has no interest in women.

“Um, if we live, you can ask Chiron,” you say. This makes even Anteros snicker a little bit. Nico scowls at you and kicks your shin under the table. “Ow! Fine then, ask Rachel, she’ll know.” He gives you a dirty look before rolling his eyes. You apologize mentally to Rachel, but on the bright side she and Reyna can start an ‘awkward sex-talk with Nico’ club.

“Whatever. What did you want Anteros?” he snaps.

“He meant to ask if there was anything in particular you needed us to do,” you cover. Nico gives you another glare. The corner of his mouth pulls back in a sneer.

“No, I meant to say ‘what do you want.’” You blink at Nico, taken aback for a second. Something about your face makes him wilt a little bit, and he looks off to the side with his chin tucked close to his chest.

“I wanted to thank you, for making this wedding possible,” Anteros says. “Ever since Python came things have been . . . There hasn’t been any music.”

“Not that there was any music in my life to begin with,” Himeros mutters. Anteros glares at him.
“Himeros, please, this is not about you-”

“So nothing,” Nico cuts in. You stare at him with your mouth open. Nico is reckless, of that you’re certain, but this is something else. With a start, you realize that you recognize the look in his eyes. The brightness there is the same anger he showed when he spoke to Octavian so long ago. He pushes up from the table and turns to stalk off. It is only after he leaves, that you realize how cold it had gotten in his presence.

“Nico, wait,” you call. He only pauses for a second to look at you, before he shoves his hands into his pockets and stalks off into the crowd. An empty and angry part of you is stuck to that seat. It smothers whatever other parts are telling you to go after him. How could he talk like that, and to gods? Gods are indiscriminate, their anger could touch you all. How could he just storm off, and leave you sitting there? The writhing jealousy earlier pricks at you again, though without the advantage of a clear subject. You just want him to come back, to think about you, to only think about you. But these love gods are staring, at you, the space Nico left, each other, and their eyes make you guilty.

You haven’t been like this in so long, you can do better.

You have been doing better, you can be better.

“I told you,” Himeros says at long last, his voice low with accusation and self-righteous lording.

Anteros punches him in the face.

“Ow! Why did you do that, it’s not my fault!” Himeros clutches at his bleeding nose. The gold drips between his fingers and stains the white table cloth with bright points of light, like stars in the daytime. You think the effect is less lovely than the stars at night.

“I know that, but you make it worse!” Anteros shouts back before slumping over the table.

You adjust yourself in your seat to remind them that you’re still there. Anteros looks at you, and his eyes look so very tired. You want to offer him a hand, even though you don’t know what more you could do for a god who clearly remembers where his own divinity lies.

“Himeros and I have another brother. He forced Nico to come out some time ago, to one of the seven,” he says. He plays with the ring on his finger, a simple gold band. “It shouldn’t have happened that way. Nico had just gotten out of Tartarus, and he was fading, and then our brother, he just-”

“You don’t have to explain to a son of Apollo how Eros can be cruel,” Himeros says from behind his hands. You hear an echo of Lee’s voice and that age old story, of Apollo and Laurel and Eros. It has been a while since you thought about your curse so much.

Anteros opens his mouth as if he wants to argue, but in the end he closes it and returns his tired eyes to his lap.

“Oh,” you say.

A little gear clicks into place in your head. It connects a fractal myriad of stories, about Nico, and the seven, and Jason, and Percy. You put all of these together into a picture that you can understand, and your heart aches for the boy you love. It was reckless and stupid to be so angry with a god, but now that you know you cannot blame him.

“I hope you have a happy marriage,” you say. Anteros watches as you get up from the table, and he
does not say another word.

...

The ceremony is beautiful. They are both literally shining, tottering on the edge of their divine form. You avert your eyes for a significant part of the proceedings, which leaves them lingering on Nico. Nico who is at your side. Nico whose sorrows do not keep him from you for long. He has his hands between his knees and his eyes cast down for most of the time as well. You reach out and put a hand on his shoulder. He looks at you with heavy, tired eyes.

It is then that you realize why Anteros looked like Nico. You have never known a love like his.

“I’m sorry,” you whisper. “Anteros told me. I’m sorry if I ever made it harder for you.” Nico sighs and shakes his head.

“Don’t be sorry. You’ve never forced me to do anything,” he says.

“That’s not true,” you say.

“You challenge me,” he says, with a certainty that is not natural to him in conversation. He leans forward, closing the distance between you just a little bit. His eyes are fever bright again, but without wrath. This is the life you had hoped to see those flickering nights in the infirmary. “It’s different.”

“I hope so,” you say. Nico rolls his eyes at you.

“Don’t be so dramatic. Now, pay attention. This is the best part.” He nods up at the altar, where the priest is professing those famous lines.

“You may now kiss your husband.”

But Nico’s eyes aren’t on the couple. He’s watching the crowd; the way the kiss sets the gathered pantheon into motion. As confetti flies, and every god, goddess, satyr and nymph jumps to their feet, you watch his shoulders hop with a laugh that you cannot hear over the roar of the crowd.

You reach out and press your fingers against his fingers, until his warrior’s hands give way, and you can hold onto him. The world around you spins out into the blinking fairy lights and music of the after party.

...

Rachel finds the two of you on the dance floor. She swings Nico around as if he weighs nothing, and then swings you around, with a little bit more difficulty. You dance with her; blink and four songs have passed.

“I should lay off the champagne,” you say. Rachel pulls a face and looks at you.

“You’ve been drinking it?” she asks.
“I feel drunk on life,” you say.

“It’s nice to see you relaxed. Ever since the truck stop you’ve been wound so tight that a slight breeze could make you snap,” she says with a breathy laugh, almost a sigh.

“I’ve got a lot of things to be worried about,” you say. Out of the corner of your eyes, you see Nico shuffle away from the dancefloor. At your side Rachel hums, and knocks into your shoulder.

“You know, if you told him how you felt, it’d be one less thing to worry about,” she says. There’s no point in pretending she doesn’t see right through you. After all she’s a prophet, and even ignoring that, you’re not subtle.

“Maybe,” you say. Rachel Elizabeth Dare looks you right in the eye, and you feel like Luke must’ve felt, watching from behind Kronos as a hairbrush smacked him in the face.

“William Solace, it’s bad luck to pass off the advice an Oracle gives you.”

“Is it?” You wonder if it isn’t worse luck to fall weakly into the mechanisms of the universe.

“Heroes always run into worse fates by trying to run away from their prophecies,” she says. There’s a sharp pain in your head as you are overcome by a sense of déjà vu.

“It’s not that easy for them,” you say. If Rachel notices your discomfort, she doesn’t say anything. She only rolls her eyes.

“‘They’” here she uses big dramatic air quotes, reminding you that you’re supposed to talking about yourself, “ought to have the dignity to face their fears.”

You are suddenly back in your classroom, arguing with the faceless woman about why heroes resist their destiny. The room slows, feels like it spins. You had never thought that it was a matter of dignity. How could something senseless carry dignity, a sense of honor, or self-worth? Your teacher asks you: “Have you ever faced fate like that?”

You are facing fate now, right? You’re chasing after Python, unwinding mess of your father, his antithesis, and their collateral. That’s something right?

When you hesitate, your teacher walks over to the window, where the dove is perched. It stares back at you.

Rachel snaps her fingers in front of your face, breaking you out of your thoughts. There’s a ringing in your ears and a tremble in your fingertips.

That had been so real. The necklace resting against your chest feels a little too hot.

“Hello, Will?” Rachel asks. You know that the acute edge to her voice is supposed to cover how much she’s worried about your silence.


“Will, are you alright?”

Something behind her moves, one of the guests, dressed head to toe in a veil. She only catches your eye, because, until that moment they had been perfectly still.

“Maybe not,” you say, pushing past Rachel. She says something but the subtleties of it are lost are swallowed as the crowd reseals behind you. The figure folds between partygoers with airy ease.
You - physical, dense - have to bend yourself to fit through the gaps other eager persons leave. You only just manage to keep an eye on her.

But then the dance floor opens up, like the edge of a cliff appearing with a sudden shift of perspective. Hapless wooden edges greet shoe sole, as you jerk to a stop. The feeling of falling this gives you makes your stomach churn, but what -

There, again, where the trellises mark out the boundaries of the wedding better than the hills and forests, you swear you see the figure. She sways back, and you chase her, but . . .

There is no one there. A name rests on the tip of your tongue. This name feels different though, it’s not a memory. It’s not like it was the last time you talked to her. This time, you feel a sense of foreboding . . . no, not foreboding. Anticipation?

Maybe you are closer than you thought. Or maybe you’re losing your mind.

Either way, you figure you should be a little worried.

The towering white trellises stare back at you. Through the cracks in their rose covered walls, you can see flashes of kaleidoscopic color, even as the roses try to push it farther away. You wander along this little alleyway. It’s nice to take a breather. Down the walkway, there are outhouses. A minor goddess steps out of one, then turns around to laugh about something. A nymph dressed in a butler’s outfit reaches over and pulls the door shut behind the goddess.

Huh, so they’re bigger on the inside. There’s probably a really good joke about what Moffat’s done to Doctor Who recently in there somewhere. Off to your left, through the trellises, you hear some voices, and they strike you as familiar.

“Care if I join you?” one says. For a second you falter. Is that Anteros’ voice?

“It’s your wedding,” another voice replies. That one you recognize as Nico. It’s a violation of privacy to listen in, and yet you find yourself knotting your fingers through the gaps in the wood and rose. You can’t quite see their faces, but you can make out the figures of Nico and Anteros, standing on the sidelines. They watch how the party unfolds and refolds, an origami evening.

“Hm, yes it is. Thank you, for making this possible by the way,” Anteros says.

“I didn’t do anything, except stay out of Will’s way,” Nico says.

Liar, you think.

“I disagree, but I didn’t come over here to fight with you about this,” he says.


“Any hero who was good with a sword could’ve kept them safe, Clarisse, or Jason, or Percy . . .” he says.

“I disagree, but I didn’t come over here to fight with you about this,” he says.

“Then what did you come over here to fight with me about?” Nico asks. Anteros chuckles a little.

“I came to apologize, for my brother,” Anteros says.

“Himeros is annoying, but you don’t have to apologize for him,” Nico says.

“I know, I’m not. I’m apologizing for Eros,” he says.
Nico’s shoulders hike up around his ears.

“You don’t know shit,” Nico says.

“I do, and I’m not going to make excuses for him. What he did was done out of a childish attempt to be like our mother. He wanted to have his own little demigod couple indebted to him, and forcing you out was the first step. Diocletian’s scepter was just his bullshit pretense, like when our mother dragged Percy and Annabeth through that stupid abandoned amusement park. It wasn’t kind, and I’m sorry you can’t get recompense for it,” Anteros says. It’s quiet for a few moments, and then Nico speaks again.

“I can and I will,” he says.

“I’m sorry?”

“Get recompense. I can and I will. I’m not afraid of the gods. There’s nothing they can take from me that I can’t take back anymore. You tell your brother that I think he’s a punk ass bitch and that the next time I see him I’m going to cut his wings off.”

Again there’s a few beats of silence, and you desperately want to put yourself between Anteros and Nico. The best you could do to remedy this situation is beg for forgiveness, but still, you could do it.

And then Anteros begins to laugh, a full bodied laugh that leaves him bent over and wheezing.

“I feel like that most days too,” Anteros says, when he recovers his composure. “I love my brother, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to see him knocked down a few pegs. You know, there aren’t a lot of demigods who I think are too much for my brother to handle, but you are definitively one of them. Believe me that’s more a blessing than a curse.”

He straightens up, and then neither of them say anything for a moment. You’re about to walk away. You’ve listened in enough, and this is starting to prick at your consciousness. Then Anteros speaks up again.

“If I may be so bold, could I offer you some advice? You know, I’m a love god too, and I specialize in requited love,” he says. Nico doesn’t respond; he just stands there quietly with his arms crossed over his chest. Whatever Anteros sees in his face must be something like permission because he starts to speak again. “A lot of heroes have fallen in love with their mentors, there’s no shame in that. But you know, even more have fallen in love with their best friends.”

Nico is quiet. You grip the trellis so hard your fingers white-knuckle. A rose thorn catches against the side of your palm, tracing a dim red line into your skin. A bead of blood trickles back beneath the cuff of your suit, staining your starched white button down a blushing bloom.

“I’m not blind you know. I know how I feel. That’s not the problem here.”

“Then what is?”

“You said it, more heroes fall in love with their best friend, right? Half the camp is his best friend. I’m not stupid enough to think I’m special.”

“You are very special Nico, but you know so is he. There’s always an exception to every rule, and he’s the exception to quite a few rules.”

“Neato,” Nico says. Anteros laughs and then hums a little.
“How about this, for him I’d say . . . Maybe it’s true, a lot of people fall in love with their best friends, but there are a few who fall in love with their heroes.”

“I’m nobody’s hero.”

*You’re mine!*

You open your mouth to call out to them, but a strange hissing sound comes out instead. When you close your mouth it continues, so you are sure that it could not have been you. What Nico said by the fire so long ago though, the thing the darkness called you . . .

No, you didn’t make that noise. You couldn’t have, right?

The pendent on your chest feels hot.

You turn slowly to face the sound.

A snake.

A snake as big around as a man. A snake with reticulated yellow skin. A snake that opens its mouth to huge fangs. A snake with black eyes. A snake with your reflection in its black eyes.

A snake that stares as if it remembers you.

It has been so long since you have seen an actual snake. Monsters and beasts have dogged your ever step but not *snakes*. You feel like a child again, up on the hill, before the wilting pine tree. Maybe this feeling is just the shaky connection between your memory and the present, repeating itself with a difference.

Your stuttered fear chokes your body, so your movements are jerky and slow.

The snake winds to strike at you. With your meticulous study of muscle, you can see the action happen in slow motion. It sits- tight, bound- then it leaps with a ripple of muscle beneath its skin like the wobble of a spent rubber band.

You are too slow.

Or rather, you would have been too slow, if it weren’t for the dove.

A flurry of white feathers strikes against the head of the snake, just as the monster begins to lift out of its coil. Both animals are thrown to the side, and roll on the ground. Still, for all the imagery around it, the dove is not a gentle thing. It digs its beak into the snake’s eyes and devours your reflection. The snake crumbles into a gold sand, and then the wind sweeps it neatly out of sight. The smell of sulfur mingles with the roses.

You blink, and the dove is gone too, replaced by a man. He shivers in and out of existence. The more you try to look at him, the less he is there. The more you try to look away, the more your eyes are drawn to the air his figure displaces.

“Well, that wasn’t very heroic,” he says. “Your true love was inches behind you, and you were still too scared to fight back.”

“Who . . .” you begin to ask. He cuts you off with a sharp laugh.

“Don’t play dumb,” he says. You only manage to lock onto his eyes for a second. His hair is a little too long, his skin pale, his eyes hallowed out, as if he could not sleep. Another one that looks like
“Eros,” you say.

“Ding ding, we have a winner! Now, let’s get down to business. I love a good love story like everyone else, but you know I don’t like hubris. Between you and me, I’d rather see Nico break, than let this happy ending happen without a little humbling. And I know you don’t want that, so why don’t you help me, hm? Just do what I say.”

You turn your head away from him, but his figure follows the path of your eyes, and then he is there, just by your side, so very real. It makes you jump out of your skin. That makes him laugh.

“No,” you say in a strained, soft voice. You catch just a glimpse of his pretty, angry, mouth, before you turn your eyes away again.

“Excuse me?” he asks.

You turn your back on him as best you can. The trellis provides a portal to another world, one where everyone is still laughing. Nico is . . . Happy. You still can’t see his face, but his shoulders are loose. Anteros laughs at something he says, batting at his arm. Nico turns his head just slightly, drawing his profile in sharp relief against the bright light of the party. With your eyes fixed on Nico, you know Eros won’t appear. His mimicry of desire could never compare with the real thing, and you know he can’t stand to be second best. Your family history assures you of that.

“Oh? You think he can save you? You think he could ever love you? No really, be honest.” His voice is hot and damp against your ear.

“Don’t equate loving and saving,” you say. Eros laughs, loud. It hurts your ear.

“So you just think it’s a game, some kind of chase. You think you can just run after him forever. Well, you are your father’s son.”

That strikes you like a lightning bolt, splitting open whatever careful barrier you had constructed inside.

“I will not make my father’s mistakes,” you hiss, whipping your head around to stare at Eros.

“You’re certainly not following his successes. How is hunting Python going?” His form flickers out, into a shimmering mirage that leaves feathers in its wake. He’s still here, you can feel it, but now he holds the same weight as the sound of the party . . . The sound of the party. It strikes you now, that you haven’t been able to hear anything for a while. The music should roar, or at least echo.

You look through the trellis at the turning of the world. It moves on, behind the green leaves. The last time you heard silence like this . . . you were stuck up a tree looking through the green-gold light of leaves. You were staring into the eyes of a snake.

“How did that snake get into your brother’s wedding?” you ask of the open air. “There’s no fear here. I’ve helped save half of these gods. He should be repelled.”

Eros sighs, “Please William, don’t be so boring. You can’t fight something by tiptoeing around it. Have the dignity to face your monsters like a man. I’m helping.”

Dignity. Again. You believe too strongly in the power of words to let that go.

“It’s not about dignity,” you say. Eros is quiet, but you imagine that he looked like Rachel did, with
bright wide eyes that were waiting for more of an answer. *I don’t have it yet,* you think. But you let yourself talk, and hope the words come to you. “You throw that word around like it’ll get under my skin. What, I don’t put a sword through its head so suddenly I’m not a hero? I don’t want to be your kind of hero. I’m a doctor. *I fix things.* I’m not here to break the world until I get lucky. Now, get out of my way,” you push through the empty air. The mirage shimmers around you, but it does not touch you.

“Where do you think you’re going? I’m not done with you,” Eros sneers.

“I’m going to fix something,” you say.

“Are you so sure?” The wall of roses seems to stretch in front of you in a never ending corridor.

“I’m doing what’s right!” you shout back, over your shoulder.

“You know your father thought he was in the right when he ruined poor Laurel. Work with me, little godling. I promise it will be worth your while.” His voice is sickly, honey heavy, sweet.

“I’d rather die,” you say.

“Then die.”

The shimmering mirage around you dissipates into truly empty air.

The second you find a break in the wall of trellises sound explodes around you. As you approach the dance floor, one of the graces snatches your hand. “Euthymia, listen, I don’t have. . .”

“Someone is asking for you,” she says, showing every inch of her pearly whites. You let yourself be dragged, hyper aware of every face you pass. Even though you left Eros behind, you’re sure he isn’t giving up. Every next face could be his. He’s a petty bastard, and you refused him. That’s all the justification he could want for doing . . . Something. You don’t know what he would do, but you’re afraid none the less.

Euthymia drops you off in front of Anteros and Nico. The latter scoffs, and looks at Anteros with wide eyes. His lips pick up in an incredulous laugh.

“How did you do that?” he asks. Anteros just smiles and waves a hand.

“This is what I do Nico. Now if you’ll excuse me I’m going to go cut my cake.” He pats Nico on the cheek and then waltzes off. Nico rubs at his cheek with narrowed eyes, but his lips have the funny bend of a poorly suppressed smile.

“What were you two talking about?” you ask. Your heart is beating in your ears to the rhythm of fear and anticipation.

“I said I had to go find you, but he said he’d bring you here. Then,” Nico snaps his fingers, “you appear.”

“I said I had to go find you, but he said he’d bring you here. Then,” Nico snaps his fingers, “you appear.”

“What can I say, I go where I’m needed,” you say with a shrug. Nico pauses and shakes his head. There’s a calm about him you haven’t seen since the morning after your nightmare. He is not as tired now, but the unshrinking set of his shoulders and the soft grace of his body as he shifts his weight a little closer to you reminds you of the way he had smoke dancing around his fingers.

“Wanted,” he corrects. You bite your lip. The ratta-tat-tat of your heart beat picks up, as you feel a blooming sense of anticipation. There’s still a little bit of fear lingering in your blood. Eros is out
there somewhere, just beyond your senses. You don’t know if you can trust Anteros. But Nico is not naturally trusting and the two parted on pleasant terms.

“Then I go where I’m wanted,” you say. “So is that all he had to say to you?”

“He had some advice for me. He’s a pretty decent guy, for a god, you know?” Nico shoves his hands into his pockets. It might be the unflinching sun, but you think he’s a little flushed. His eyes keep moving from your eyes, down a little way across your body, over to the crowd and then back again.

“It must’ve been really good advice. I thought you hated him?” you ask. There’s a little stage opposite the wall of roses, and upon it a six tiered cake appears. The whole thing is covered in bright red roses. Anteros and Hymen stand to one side of it. Hymen looks different than you imagined. He’s a plum man, with round ruddy cheeks like a cherub.

“We were just talking about Eros, and missed opportunities, and . . .”

Hymen and Anteros fumble the knife, blushing and laughing at each other. The crowd erupts into giggles as well, cutting off whatever else Nico was saying.

“What?” you ask.

“You,” he says. You’re not sure what he’s trying to say, but you came here with the intent of fixing what you’ve long since left festering. You have a legion of regrets. Nico can’t be one of them.

“Nico, I actually . . . I wanted to say something to you.”

“Yeah?” A frown perches on his lips and he stares at you, but there’s something close to understanding there. If you could only get out half the words maybe this time he’d understand.

“Yeah, I-”

“Alright, alright, we’ll count down!” Hymen calls back at the crowd.

“I’ve been meaning to say it for a while, but I keep getting-”

“Five!” The horrible anticipation and fear of fear comes back to you, twisted by the memory of how you failed this before. You can almost feel the roof over your head. The swirling nymphs look a little more like soldiers. The music is not heavy, but there is a distinct base to it.

“Nico I-”

“Four!”

“What?” He steps in closer to you, lifting up and turning his head so you can hear. His dark curls brush against his cheek.

“Three!”

“Nico-” You lean down; his dark curls brush against your cheek.

“Two!”

“I love-”

“One!”
Something pricks at your chest, knocking the breath from your lungs. Your voice sticks in your throat. Again. Always again. You look down. The coin on your chest is hot, so you pull it out and fiddle with it. There’s a dent just off to the side where it would have been covering your heart that you only recognize because you are a son of Apollo. This is an arrow dent. It smells faintly of roses.

*Eros.*

“Will?” Nico asks. He peeks into your line of sight, lifting your gaze from the coin. “Are you okay?”

You lived thanks to sheer dumb luck. Or rather, your heart survived. You want to cry, to scream, maybe to vomit, as the thought of what you might have done makes rings around your head. Nico is looking at you with wide bright eyes. That look makes you sick with shame. A few centimeters to the left, and you could have been a monster. You could have been another cruel thing in Nico’s life. One more scar to make Misery laugh.

“Sorry,” you say. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t- It’s nothing. Ignore me.”

You force a smile and look down at him. He looks so trusting and open. His lips form a soft smile, tinged with an anticipation of understanding. You know that Nico can read you like a book, anyone could when you’re so vulnerable. There are still trembling words on your tongue, things you want to say. Whatever you say next, he’ll believe you, he’ll listen.

This is different than the New Year. No hand reaches out to grab you, no world threatens to tear you away. The only snake that sits in your mouth is your tongue, but it none the less betrays you. Three words and you cannot say them.

You have to look away.

On stage, Hymen shoves his piece of cake into Antero’s face. The crowd jumps with laughter, and erupts into wolf whistles when Anteros picks Hymen up in revenge. With an easy grace, he tosses his now-husband into the cake. The whole thing collapses, scattering across the floor in a bright paint splatter of pink cake. Hymen laughs, tumbling after the table a few seconds behind the cake. Anteros reaches to catch him, slips on the cake, and together they fall to the stage. Both their faces are smeared with cake and icing and smiles.

You feel yourself smile and laugh despite the horror of Eros and Python looming over your shoulder. Something about this unbothered happiness in the face of disaster reminds you of how you hope. Demigods on the streets of Manhattan, children who are always better for their humanity. If so many children can work miracles, then you can hold out hope. If you can’t tell Nico you love him, maybe you can at least share this.

For the first time in a long time, you feel light itch beneath your fingers. So this is the lightness you have missed. You turn from the stage.

“Nico, did you-”

He kisses you.

Nico kisses you.

In each second this fact endures, it turns itself over anew. His lips are rough, the edges of skin catch against your own for just a moment, as he brushes over your lips before sinking into-

A kiss.
He kisses you.

Is kissing you.

He is gentle for someone so inexperienced, so sharp. You have never known him to be so gentle. This kiss is a lift of those last few inches between you, and a press of sweet trembling lips against the little smile you held for him. He seals the kiss slowly; there is no rush.

He kisses you.

Before it happens there is a split second his breath warm against your sensitive skin. Then there is pressure. Then his lips move against yours. There is some trepidation there, but a shivering want makes him sure.

Nico kisses you.

Your heart beats in your fingertips, a startled throb at every pulse point.

He kisses you, gods, is kissing you.

Nico’s nervous fingers dance over the air of your chest, your neck. One had presses against your shoulder, to steady him as he reaches up.

Nico kisses you, and then he pulls away, and you stare dumbstruck, and you cannot quite tell if this is real or not.

You were losing your mind earlier right? Eros was trying to manipulate you, right?

Nico looks at you with waiting eyes. One hand is still on your shoulder, the nervous other one continues to flutter. With every second the understanding and hope you see in him is bent by anxiety. The steadying hand on your shoulder lifts a little bit.

“Yes!” On stage Anteros jumps up and down. You look for a second, he looks right at you. Hymen laughs, still sitting cake-covered on the floor.

Anteros smiles with bright satisfaction, and then there is a break where his lips part and his eyes say no.

And then you are not standing on the ballroom floor anymore. Nico’s fingers are wrenched from your shoulder as wind drags you back, hissing. The air smells like roses again as the party shatters before our eyes. Each sparkling bit of color scatters as the gathered pantheon rush away. You hear, above the hissing wind, a kind of scream that is louder, and more monstrous. As your body jerks with the feeling of falling, you hear metal sing against metal. A black something strikes the wind around you, but the wind only screams. It does not stop. It drags you farther, up, away. The party becomes small, blurring to a smooth spill, as if of champagne.

You blink and it is all gone before you, only a wide world stretches out. It’s white speckled skin and blue trimmings make it seem so very unreal.

“You say you won’t make your father’s mistakes, but how about your brother’s?” Eros asks against your ear.

Eight miles of wind all rushes at you at once, clawing at your clothing. The ground doesn’t rush at you, it hardly seems to move at all, and that is about the time you realize there is no air. You try to scream, but there is no air.
“What’s wrong, Phaethon, haven’t you always wanted to see the doors of the Sun Palace, to know you’re Apollo’s child?” How cruel, his voice is still so sweet.

Perhaps he meant to insult you by calling you Phaethon. He was always one of the myriad of warnings that Lee didn’t feel the need to tell you about. There would always be someone who thought it a moral imperative to remind a child of Apollo where one of their earlier brothers had fucked up. But you have always had an acute sympathy for Phaethon. He was just a boy who wanted to know who his father was, and when he finally found Apollo, he only wanted to make his father proud. Who could fairly say that if given the chance to pull the sun chariot, they would say no?

Phaethon drew too near the ground, and scorched a forest into the Sahara. He panicked. He crashed. He died. So what if Phaethon isn’t so different from you? To a son of Apollo the threat of an early death is now news. And you are not ashamed to say that you want to know your father.

Eros’ form is nothing to you, but air. There is nothing but air against your eyes. It strips all moisture, tearing a sob from your body without the breath. You gasp, and think so this is where I die. It reminds you of the tree at camp, and of Python.

This is where you die, falling again. This is why you die, struggling through a grudge match centuries old because a man you’ve never met can’t apologize, and a man half a ghost can’t let things go. In its simplest form it’s not that different from how you thought you would die on this quest, except, Eros isn’t Python. He’s angry and resentful and he hates your father, but if he had the oracle, he would have the foresight to know that killing you won’t make him feel better.

“Yes,” you whisper. You know Eros will hear you. “I have.”

You’ve also always wanted to see the world outside of what you know, although you always imagined that would happen via college. The ground is starting to grow now, and you can’t stand to look at it, so you roll to face the sky.

As you turn you catch sight of shimmery train of gold cut against the blue sky above you, tracing careful gold lines up a single wing. The hints of form that glisten beneath the sun remind you, strangely, of some perverse form of the Icarus myth. The cut to Eros’ wing slices almost all the way through. Had Eros been anything less than a god he would have lost it. Drops of ichor mingle with the clouds, and it looks like the white table cloth with Himeros’ blood, like stars against a white sky. It is still not as beautiful as night.

“Stupid child,” Eros says. “He doesn’t care.”

You close your eyes. You know it’s true, but even still. Some part of you remembers that Phaethon was immortalized in his story, that Apollo mourned for him. You think that you could be content with that.

Then your body stops.

You feel it happen, though you don’t quite understand what it is. You don’t jerk to a stop like someone grabbed you and there’s no immediate freeze, like there would have been if you had hit the ground. Instead, it’s like you slow, more and more until you’re floating. Then your heels bump into something.

You open your eyes. The sky is a blue and white motley and you can see the faint glimmer of something like rain drops leaving a trail as you sink farther and farther onto the earth below you. Your head presses down into the grass. It tickles the back of your neck.
The spell breaks, your tears splatter back down against your cheeks and forehead, mingled with ichor.

Oh, you realized at long last, I’m not dying.

“That’s enough Eros!” The voice snaps you up out of your thoughts. You sit up, and look around to find Anteros crouched by your side. There is something supremely painful about the look on his face. He almost looks betrayed, but it’s more helpless, more desperate than that.

“What about your wedding?” Eros asks. His form blends out of the air. One moment he is not there, and the next he just is. Your mind struggles to fill in the gaps.

“It’s over, look around,” Anteros gestures at the empty field. There is no trace that a wedding party was ever strung out between the trees and low rolling hills. It looks as if nothing has touched this place in years.

“Shouldn’t you be out-”

“What’s wrong with you? What will it take for you to give up on this?” Anteros’ voice breaks in a desperate, angry sob. Eros shifts his weight, from one hip to the other. A hand brushes your shoulder, and you look into Hymen’s round face.

“Come, your friends need you,” he says, pulling you away.

“I don’t give up. I’m not you Anteros. Your kind of love will always fade,” Eros’ words bite into Anteros as if they had teeth, and Anteros flinches before his body begins to glow with white-hot divine wrath.

“You’re obsessed,” Anteros screams back.

“Don’t look,” Hymen says, turning your face away. Soft white wings stretch out from his back, forming something like a barrier, while he turns your face away. He lifts you from the ground, in one short, gut bending spurt, and then drops you back down again among the trees. Sounds of a fight blare around you. At you back you hear an explosion of some kind and the earth shakes, in front of you, you hear the ring of steel against something just as sharp.

“Good luck,” Hymen whispers, and then he is gone.

You sprint through the underbrush, following a path as long as it suits your needs. The path dumps you into a clearing near the side of the road. The world is split into pieces, moving too quickly for you to string together a narrative. Hissing, swords, the huge looming shape of some monster, fractal white shards of clattering dead bodies, fissures in the ground, steel, and then there, Nico. The world orientates itself, so that he is at the center, surrounded by all these things, the monster, grotesque as she is, the storm of skeleton soldiers which clime the monster’s form, the fissures crisscrossing the ground around him.

Oh, but wait, the hissing is right next to you.

Two gold drakones slither around you, in a winding, perfect, circles. Each passing second they move closer to you, their rhythm easy, their eyes bright. As one approaches you stumble back, only to step nearer to the other. Such horrible brilliance, such smooth, monstrous, grace. The pendent around your neck burns again. In the places where the burnt metal brushes your skin, you swear you will be left blistering. But there is no time to worry about that, not time at all. One strikes. It’s a joke, honestly. If they wanted to hit you, it would be so easy. This one strikes, and you start, falling over yourself as you try to get away from its teeth.
“Will!” The voice that screams your name is high and feminine. You only have enough time to see Rachel, her face as pale as winter light. She shakes as if that cold were upon her. You do not see Nico look your way, but you do see a fissure rip through the ground, creating a sharp divide between one drakon and you. White fingers claw their way up from that split, scrabbling at the drakon.

You try to make the most of this distraction. The necklace tumbles out of your shirt as you flail back to your feet. Although it is bent, it catches the light and the eyes of the drakon. The skeletons pose little threat as one crosses the divide. Now the two drakon are on the same side. The move back and forth, snaking closer as a pair. The coin seems to fascinate them, although you don’t expect that the fixation will last for long. If only you could know why-

*It belonged to Medea.* You can hear Lou Ellen’s voice as clear as day. The memory strikes you in the center, dredging up a writhing homesickness even as it makes you hopeful. Medea’s chariot was pulled by a pair of drakon. If this is hers, then maybe you can-

The drakon slither towards you, a little faster, hissing. Their eyes flicker from the necklace to you and back to the necklace. You may be sun-born, but you are not Medea, and it’s clear that they know that. You lift your eyes from the drakones as your mind jumps from one possible solution to the next. Then you see her, Rachel, standing back, still wide eyed.

You are not Medea, not even close. But the self-possessed, magic-using girl who rejected one of the greatest heroes of your age? She just might be.

You ease around the serpents. They follow you, snaking across the valleys, and ridges Nico tore up in his fight. The going is slow and difficult for you, walking backwards across that terrain. You don’t dare take your eyes off of the drakones.

“Will?” Rachel’s voice is low an insistent as you step close to her.

“Rachel I’m going to give this to you. It should protect you.” There’s a tense pause and then, quick exhalation of breath.

“What about you?”

“I’m going to help Nico.” You take your eyes off the drakones just long enough to see her searching, terrified look. “Trust me, it’ll be fine.” Rachel nods, her eyes flicker to the drakones. One hisses at her, and she jumps, clamping a hand to your shoulder like a vice grip. You ease the pendent from your neck, holding it up for the drakones to see. The light catches it, and it glows more than ever. Rachel reaches out, and grabs the necklace. Just like that the vague way the drakones watched you shifts into precise interest. Rachel lets out a shaky break as they bow their heads to her.

She sucks in a sharp breath when they turn their eyes to you, and hiss. One lunges, as quick as lightning.

“Stop!” Rachel screams, her arms outstretched. As if commanded by magic, the serpent jerks to a stop. You don’t push your luck, and leap over the thing, running towards Nico. The monster that stands before him makes you stagger back.

She is the horror of horrors, the thing which would haunt even Erebus’ nightmares. Writhing beasts spill from her gut, only to be sucked back in and born again. Black, bat like wings beat hot, dry air around you with a gale force that knocks back skeletons. Nico has to crouch to bear the wind. A scorpion tail lashes out at him, sickly and black, but Nico pivots, twists his wrist and the thing is batted away.
Nico’s army of skeletons claw forward, tearing away at her arms as she swings her fiery whip. The spitting vipers that wriethe from her legs bite the skeletons’ bones in two, mingling the splinters with their fangs. What splitting skin stretches across the top of her body is scaled like a snake. Even the contours of her face are scaled. You think her face is worst of all. It is almost beautiful. Almost human.

Your heart stops for a moment as you remember the last time you saw her. She came from the Labyrinth. She fought even Percy and Annabeth nearly to death. She was swallowed by stone. Kampê was the kind of monster who could break an army.

Nico sneers, rolling as her whip smashes into the ground next to him. Patches of fire smolder in the grass here and there, but the wind from her wings is perpetually blowing them back. Even standing a few yards away, you feel like you can hardly breath. There is something sour, acidic, mixed with the air. Kampê swings a scimitar at Nico as he advances. It glows green. Wisps of boiling vapor rise from it, as if the thing can breathe.

Their blades meet, his black iron crashing against her steel. After a few furious strikes, Nico is out again. His scowl is deeper.

You want to do something, anything, but you don’t know where your backpack is. Cecil’s switchblade still rests in your back pocket, but you’re not good with a sword. Her voice chatters in a high pitched grinding, dipping into something low and grating occasionally. Nico spits something back in this tongue, and you recognize it as Erebus’ speech, that of souls and things just as old.

Kampê tears one arm free of the skeletons, throwing them in a storm like writhing snow. The fire whip reels back. Nico digs his heels in. Waits. You can imagine the crack before you see it. You can imagine that Nico would be just a few seconds too slow. Something in your stomach lurches, something on your tongue reminds you of a dream you once had.

From your hands celestial-
Like sharing a secret-

You reach out, still yards away, as if the whip where just past your fingertips, and you could hold it back. Twisting bands of gold shoot from your fingertips as Kampê’s wrist flicks forward. The quick arc of the whip is broken, tangled, by your light. The thing slams against the ground. Nico had already jumped, rolled to the side. The whip landed a foot from where he had been standing. He looks at it, at the tangle of gold thread. Kampê does too.

She looks at you. Her eyes are strange, as if she recognizes you, but that can’t be. You never saw her during the battle, only heard her. She tilts her head to the side. She says something, a few simple, short words. Nico’s face grows wide with terror.

For a moment the skeletons all hold still. You did not know they were so deeply connected to his thoughts.

Kampê says only one short word, and this time her lips lift into a freakish mimicry of a smile.

“No,” Nico says. Like a flash of lightning Nico’s horror explodes into rage.

The earth around Kampê blackens, and spikes of sharp earth shoot up at her feet. With a flap of her mighty wings she lifts above their piercing thrust, only to slam back down, shattering the earth with the force of her body. Lattices of white trace the edges of these spikes of earth, as they continue to thwart Kampê’s feet. For a second you wonder what they are, but your breath clouds in front of you,
and you realize with a start that the air is deathly cold.

All at once the skeletons begin to run, scream. The earth shakes with their voices. Kampê tries to lift her whip again, and pull away the gold threads, but you close your fist, holding tight to your strings of light. It’s a stupid decision. She yanks once and you nearly go flying. However, when she yanks a second time, your feet stick to the ground. Looking down, you see a dark, inky pool of shadow, where your feet have sunk almost into the earth. When the shadow retreats, there is a collection of clear glittery stone covering your toes. You could back out of it if you wanted, but the diamond mold holds you firm as Kampê yanks again.

Still, your arms are not terribly strong, and holding onto her whip is like holding onto a kite in a hurricane. Nico makes good use of the opening. He advances with slow, deliberate steps, shaking the earth. More fissures appear. They reek of sulfur, and in their depths you swear you can almost see the fires of Hades. Kampê meets each swing of his sword, slashing and parrying the black nickle with such blinding speed and precision, that you can’t quite tell where one move ends and the next begins. Everything looks choreographed. Seamless. The skeletons tangle themselves around her legs, and bear the brunt of the vipers with their body. But then Nico blinks. It is as if a shadow passed over their world, and he went with it. The effect only lasts a moment, but it makes Nico stumble. The flat of Kampê’s scimitar smashes into his side, and knocks him to the ground. The earth ceases to shake.

“Nico!”

You trip over yourself, releasing your strings of light as you desperately try to get to him. It would do nothing. You could do nothing. You are so, helpless, but you can’t lose him. He flickers again. This time, he is gone for more than the span of the blink. His shoulder shake, as he struggles to push himself up. Not fast enough. Neither of you are fast enough.

Kampê raises her blade. The sunlight, in all of its white heat, catches against the metal. The effect is almost painful to look at. As she brings her hand down, two bullets of gold streak past you, and launch themselves at Kampê. The force of their strike stumbles her, as she screams. The drakones, Medea’s drakones, curl around her. Their golden skin reflects the sun, rivals Kampê’s blade. Her sword arm is pinned, but the other is free. She drops her whip, tries to pry them off.

Rachel stumbles over to you. The gold coin still dangles from her hand. You want to ask, how did you do that, but her face answers first. She looks as if she wants to say, I don’t know, it scares me, this thing. I don’t know.

“Will, are you alright?” she says. Her arms loop underneath your shoulders and hoist you up. Kampê screams. Her voice claws at your ears, scratches at your brain. Nico, on the ground, shakes, but he gets one knee beneath his body. The tail of one of the drakones wraps around Kampê’s leg, holding her in place.

Now, if you could get to Nico now, you could-

He stands.

Or, something stands. For a moment you are not sure you recognize him.

Every shadow that the summer sun casts bends towards him. Some even draw up, encasing his body in a bending shadow. He holds out his hand, and each shadow does its dual work, bending around Kampê and the drakones. The sun overhead darkens. Or rather, there is just as much light as before, but there is something else in the sunlight. You try to look towards the sun, but you feel some baser instinct turn your head away. What had Nico said of Erebus’ shadows? There are things demigods
The sun seems to spill forth as much blinding, sucking, darkness as it does light. This feeds the thing that clings to Kampê’s form, the sick, black, stickiness of it. Nico’s hand comes up. A circle of black earth rushes out from beneath Kampê, swallowing, the grass as it shrivels to ash. Then the field of black cracks, her weight stutters down, a step closer to the earth.

Nico turns his head. He turns his wrist. The shadows around Kampê squeeze her. They squirm underneath and across the drakones, so those things which came to their aid become victims too. All around the wind begins to pick up. It screams in your ears, and whips at what few things are left living in the clearing. Each of the skeletons crumple, retuning to ash, and the occasional white flecks of bone. Kampê writhes. Her screams rise with the air, rise as the temperature continues to drop. You put your hands over your ears, but nothing you can do can keep her screaming out.

Then the top of her head splits open. The shadows pour inside, bloating her skin, till it schleps off in a great peeling heap that is equal parts monster, and black oozing shadow. A yellow stream of something shoots out of the body’s shell. For a second you think it must be sulfur, but then the thing writhes, and solidifies. It hits the earth as a yellow python, with eyes that know, instinctively, where you are.

At your side Rachel gasps. You look over. Her eyes are fixed on the horizon, as if she can see past the stars.

Nico tilts his head the other way. With a flick of his finger the shadows race to seize the snake. It tries to wriggle free, but his hold is tight. The shadows dig into the body, as it shifts, blinks, sometimes, to a different form. It looks almost translucent, then it is back to its bright, yellow, body, then translucent again.

“No,” Rachel whispers.

The blackened earth beneath Nico’s feet cracks. You can hardly see him now for the way his storm of bending shadows cling to his body.

Something brushes your cheek. You turn your head just slightly to catch a glimpse of a white veil, a woman’s pale lips moving as she speaks.

“Stop him,” she says, as on your other side, Rachel screams, “Nico!”

You sprint towards him as the world begins to shake again. The fissures, the bones, your own terrified feet, they all do their damndest to trip you. The blackened earth beneath your feet is sometimes mired and sticky like tar, and other times as slick and smooth as obsidian.

Nico begins to pull his hand back. As he does so the translucent form of the snake shifts as if it were being pulled from the body. Then the turns his hand and pulls down.

Once more the earth cracks, shuttering down beneath both the snake and your love.

You reach out to him, but you are too far away.

His shadows rush around him, encircling, binding, trapping, as much as they empower him.

In this blistering moment, you catch a flash of light. It is a trick, just the sun against his silver, skull ring, but the pinprick reminds you a single star in a city skyline. It reminds you of Ester, holding her hand, showing you just a peak of her stars in the daylight.
One secret rises to your fingertips: *I love you.* It explodes from your very center.

What little soul the python has is at last wrenched free from its body, and sucked down, down, into the black unknown. The part that is left behind crumbles, and is swept apart by the wind.

The shadows around Nico stop. Then, as if his soul were collapsing like final moments of a great star, all that is around him tumbles in. The shadows curl against his body, leaving behind a misty husk. His face is as still as the look of distance on death can be. His eyes are closed in gentle acquiescence as his soul begins to slip down, unaware of the earth beneath his feet.

Your light encircles him. You feel the full weight of his soul. It is heavy as you fight the sinking. Every second your feet bring you closer, your light compounds. Underneath the full gaze of the sun high above, he looks as if he were less than a dream.

But you keep him above the ground. You keep the soul above its domain, until your shaking hands wrap around his body. Every inch of your skin is warm and encased in a glow. Eros could stand above you, bleeding out his ichor against your skin for eternity, and you would look no less brilliant.

You hold him. His weight sits against your arms as if he were built from the fine turned bones of song birds. He does not move. He threatens, at every mismove to spill from you, into a distant nothingness.

You clutch him to your chest, rocking back and forth. Blinding tears streak the mud and ash that coats your cheek.

In a breathless voice, you whisper, “Come back.”

He flickers, sliding through your fingers like wisps of smoke.

Again. “Come back.”

You press your lips to his forehead, and feel nothing pressing back against you. It is like kissing a dream. The gold leaking from your hands, from your chest, from every point of hope your body contains, is not enough to shelter him. You shake, down to your core, and some fractured things comes loose there: a song. It cracks as it leaves your throat, desperate and pleading.

“*Che bella cosa e' na giornata 'e sole. Ma n'atu sole, cchiù bello, oje ne'*

'O sole mio . . . *please,*

sta 'nfronte a te . . .

'O sole, 'o sole mio . . .”

**Chapter End Notes**

I would like to give a special shout out to my beta, for gently reminding me that I have to finish this shit, and Rosyredlipstick for leaving a comment on literally every single chapter I’ve written. That honestly made me so giggly my roommate could not stop teasing me.
Sometimes when Nico feels himself fading, there’s a tiny little part of him, hiding in the corner of his mind, that’s happy . . . No, not happy . . . Content. Maybe satisfied. Death does not scare him like it did when he was a child. Instead the thought of death was always put off by the knowledge that he had something else to do, some monster to fight, some quest to complete. When he starts to fade all of that is over. It’s taken out of his hands, and Nico feels lighter for it.

This isn’t anything like that though.

Now he feels actually happy. Maybe, it’s because this is so different from those other times. He feels immaterial, not in the sense that he’s lost all of his substance, but more like . . . He remembers a time when he was younger. He remembers a field in Italy. It was summer and it was the feeling of the sun sitting on his skin like a warm blanket. The heat wound all the way through him, breaking the last of winter’s hold as it tried to linger deep within his bones. The cold was gone, gone in a way that made him forget what it was like to shiver.

It’s surreal how good something new can feel, when everything new since the age of ten has been a curse. How to take a hit from a sword, how to live with loss, how to survive on the company of the dead, how to see and not scream, how to rend a soul from its body . . . These are horrors he’s learned to wear like stitches in an open wound. For each and everyone one, he presses through the new agony, holding himself together with the knowledge that all of his suffering is finite and that, perhaps one day, he will live in the asphodel fields, never to feel again. Then those stitches fade away to the back of his mind, and leave a new scar, a new bit of inflexible and numb soul. He expects that as he wakes (for by now, he has realized that this must be a dream. He supposes that even Sisyphus has dreams while he rolls his rock), this feeling of bliss will fade like the agony. There is a precedent for life to tend towards the mean. If pain fades, then so too will happiness. Still, he takes his time waking. (Even Sisyphus rests at the top of his hill as he watches his rock roll down . . . down . . . down)

But he is wrong. He’s not used to being wrong about these things. The further he departs from sleep the more he acutes his dream-like feeling is. There is a soft pressure along one side of his body and another curling around his waist. A buzz skitters through his chest as he feels, more than hears, someone singing. The thing that really gets him though, is the hand carding through his hair in time to the buzzes and dips of the song. Occasionally he can feel the light drag of blunt nails across his scalp. He can’t remember the last time he felt someone’s touch and did not feel exposed. When should he break this peace? Now, and let the moment stay pure? Or should he bask in this single, good thing, at the risk of letting it wither and rot?

For the moment he decides to simply let it happen. He lets himself relax and listen to the words of the song.

“Come on and slam and welcome to the jam, come on and-”

At that moment Nico realizes exactly what’s going on. It’s always you, isn’t it?

“Will, what the fuck are you singing?” Nico sits up, blinking awake to glare at you. What he expects to see is that dazzling smile, perked up in a smirk, and those brilliant blue eyes, sparkling with mischief. However today seems to be a day of flipped expectations. You’re much too pale, your eyes
are a bit blood shot and that smile . . . There’s no denying that it’s a happy smile, but it’s so exhausted that it’s barely even a ghost of its former self.

“Space Jam. I ran out of hymns to sing, and then I started to run out of songs to sing.” Your voice sounds raw, now that it’s not laced with the Apollo cabin’s gift for melody.

“How long was I out for?” Nico feels the arm around his waist begin to go slack, and it’s about that time that he truly realizes that he has been curled up in your lap.

“At least twenty-four hours.” Your voice is only a little more than a mumble.

“Twenty-four . . . Have you been singing that whole time?” Nico pushes aside his embarrassment (mostly because he’s not really all that embarrassed, this intimacy is too comfortable for things like that) and makes your wandering eyes meet his. His hands rest gentle on your cheeks.

“I took breaks every once in a while to talk to Rachel,” you say.

Nico looks at you, like he can’t quite believe what he’s hearing.

“Will!” He can’t decide if he wants to kiss you or throttle you, caught up in the exciting and terrifying idea that someone would do so much for him. Your eyes sink heavy, blinking in long, slow movements. Nico carries on regardless. “What the actual Hades were you-”

Relief floods into your body, pushing out the last of your strength. Your head thumps down onto Nico’s shoulder. Nico doesn’t speak.

“I’m so glad you woke up Nico.” The arm around his waist tightens for a second, then it goes limp.

“Go to sleep, Will,” Nico says, though he knows you’re already long gone.

Nico closes his eyes as your warm breath ghosts across his skin.

*He’s only glad that you’re awake so that he can sleep now,* he tells himself. Still, Nico can’t help but hope that the ache in your voice and the relief on your face meant more than that.

. . .

“Will . . .”

Your mouth taste like zombie ass, your throat feels like you gargled razor blades and you’re . . . you’re lying down. How did you get to be lying down? Where are you? You try to sit up before you’ve even opened your eyes and shit, you definitely have a throbbing migraine too. Your body aches a bit. You’re probably severely dehydrated, and a bit starving if the nervous shake in your arms is anything to go by.

“Will . . .”

There’s a hand on your shoulder and your eyes open instinctively. You add ‘severely tongue tied’ to your list of symptoms. Turns out you’re lying down in the back seat of a car, the door to which Nico di Angelo has just opened. He looks beautiful framed by the sun outside, and there’s a light in his eyes. Maybe it’s a little amusement at your dazed and confused face or maybe Nico’s really starting to get that life back. Something in your dehydrated, sleep-slogged mind tells you that you could
probably find out if you kissed him. Unsurprisingly, your inhibitions are totally shot, so for once, you actually try to act on your urge to kiss him.

“We’re taking a pit stop to get something to eat here,” Nico informs you curtly. Then he’s gone and the sun is shining directly in your eyes. It’s enough to really wake you up, and get your brain kicking into high gear. Thank the gods you only got as far as propping yourself up on your elbows. Then you remember the wedding. Would it really have been so strange for you to kiss him?

But Nico leaves before you get the chance to find out.

“How right up,” he calls.

“Be right there,” you mumble, stumbling out of the car and into the daylight. Your party has stopped at a weird looking little restaurant. The first problem you have with it is that it’s not a chain like you’re used to seeing. The second problem is that it’s aggressively Texas looking and there’s a fountain outside it. Those two things don’t look like they should go together. The third problem is that nothing around the building looks like it’s been used in years, except maybe the gas station down the street. There’s not even asphalt in some places, there’s just gravel.

“Um, hey.” You manage to snag Rachel as she’s coming back to the car. “Did you and Nico check this place out yet?” She just smirks.

“Relax, I can see through the Mist remember?” That doesn’t quite satisfy you, and she rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I checked it out. It’s just a little burger joint.” You nod.

“Alright, well, my next question is why do we have a car?” You gesture behind you at the big back sedan.

“I called my dad’s car company at a rest stop a mile down the road from where we stopped. They brought us something.” Rachel purses her lips, but she shrugs off the irritation quickly enough.

“Neither of you can drive?” Maybe it’s just your imagination but Rachel seems to be giving you a look that says she doesn’t quite think you’re all there.

“Jules-Albert drove.” You gape at her for a second, before looking into the driver’s seat.

“Nico summoned a zombie?” Rachel almost looks suspicious, like she thinks you’re trying to pull one over on her, but you’re honestly not. You have no idea what’s going on, but you do know one thing. If she’s about to say yes, you’re about to be pissed.

“Um, yes. Jules is a zombie, so I guess by calling him, he summoned a zombie.” Her head quirks to the side as she takes in your blank face. “Will are you . . .?”

“How long was I asleep for?” You try your best to swallow despite the rawness of your throat. The sunlight hurts your eyes but the more you blink the less your vision focuses.

“Well you fell asleep yesterday at like six, and it’s like noon now so . . . eighteen hours?” You nod carefully. That’s not as bad as you thought. On the flip side, that means that Nico summoned a zombie within forty-eight hours of almost disappearing. You feel strangely numb thinking about that.

“Where’s Nico?” You’re not sure what you voice sounds like, but Rachel’s gaze softens.

“He’s inside ordering for all of us.” You don’t bother asking about how he’s paying for the food, or what happened to the zombie or anything else. You just wander inside. The man at the counter looks startled, and eyes you suspiciously.
“Yes, hello. Can I help you?” It sounds like an accusation. Without looking at the man behind the counter, you scan the restaurant. No Nico. Your pulse spikes.

“I’m looking for my uh . . . Friend.” You resist the urge to give him a full medical description of Nico and try to breathe normally.

“Out that way,” He points to a door just to the side of the restrooms. “He is sitting outside.” You barely nod at him. The outside seating area is strangely pretty. It’s not much more than a poorly cobbled courtyard surrounded by two meter, messy hedges, but something about that makes you feel a little calmer. You suppose that spending so much time dealing with mythology makes you more comfortable in places that look like ruins. Or maybe it’s just because Nico’s sitting at one of the stone tables, munching away on some fries. He looks over at you and waves a hand.

“Hey, I wasn’t sure what you wanted so I just got you a plain hamburger and curly fries.” He gestures at a huge spread of food, and you’re pretty sure the three of you will never be able to eat that much. Nico must really like fries because there are like, six orders of them.

“Water?” You ask, sliding into the bench next to him. He looks at you strangely, and it takes you a moment to realize that when he was talking about your food he had pointed to the other side of the table. You just reach across and kind of drag it toward yourself, rather than leave Nico’s side. Nico frowns for a moment, but nods.

“Yeah, sure.” He points to a cup and you try your best not to chug it all down at once, repeating proper dehydration treatment in your head like it’s a hymn.

“Thanks,” you say after the last of your water’s gone. You’ll need more, but for now this is enough to push the headache back and help focus your vision.

“Does your throat hurt?” Nico asks, picking at his fries.

“Like I swallowed a cactus,” you say with a wry smile. “But I’m mostly just dehydrated and starving.”

“I’ll have Jules-Albert get you more water.” The zombie moves and you nearly jump out of your skin. One moment there is a blank expanse of deep shadow, and the next his rotting hand is reaching for you. His dead eyes meet yours, and although there isn’t enough skin on his face to form expressions, you get the feeling that he doesn’t like you. He takes the cup soundlessly and goes inside.

“I think there’s some nectar in the car. You’re probably exhausted after all the magic you used,” Nico says after a beat, poking at his food again. He gives you a look out of the corner of his eye like he’s expecting something, but you’re not sure what.

“Hm, you’re probably right. I’ll get some later, though. It’s best not to take nectar on an empty stomach. Plus, I’d rather have curly fries. I can’t remember the last time I had curly fries that weren’t from Arby’s,” you shudder and start to shove food into your mouth as calmly as possible. It’d be so easy to scarf everything down, but then you might just make yourself sick.

“What’s your beef with Arby’s?” Nico asks.

“Mostly the beef,” you say and he snorts a laugh, trying his best not to smile.

“That was awful,” he says. “You’re awful.”

“You know you love me.” The words are out of your mouth before you realize how heavy they
might be. Nico blushes bright red, and you feel your own cheeks heat up.

You kissed.

Right you kissed, and now things like ‘you love me’ might not be totally hyperbole.

Jules-Albert chooses that time to return with the water. He sets it down in front of you, spilling a little bit over the side. Then he returns to his shady corner of the courtyard. He just stares blankly at the two of you. If you thought things were awkward before, under Jules’ watchful gaze things are just plain weird.

“Um, I don’t mean to be rude but is there any way you can make him leave? His staring is starting to freak me out,” you say. Nico gives you another look out of the corner of his eye, and you really wish you knew what that meant so you had some idea of how to respond to it.

“Sure,” Nico says after a second. He turns to Jules-Albert. “Go help Rachel find her sketch book and her pencils.”

The zombie chauffer shuffles back through the restaurant. You wonder vaguely what the guy at the front desk sees.

“Why did you summon him?” you ask, once you are absolutely sure that there is no zombie watching you. It takes you a second to realize that you’re not as angry with Nico as you would have been last year. That’s not to say your feelings are weaker, they’re just more complicated.

“We needed to get out of there . . .” Nico looks down at his hands, fists clenched. You roll your words around in your mouth, trying out their taste before risking them.

“Did you think about what would have happened if you had disappeared, for good this time?” you ask, watching Nico closely. His hands are perilously still.

“Yes.” The word is tight and clipped. You know he’s angry with you for asking. You’re angry with yourself for ruining this possible moment, but you want to know.

“Then why did you do it?” you ask. Nico snaps, turning towards you. There’s something about the movement that seems familiar, but you can’t quite place it.

“What was I supposed to do?” The icy edge of his voice brings it all back to you. His body moves with military precision, shoulders turning before his head, like he could strike you dead without having to look. It reminds you of Reyna in the infirmary, the first night you met her. That was barely a year ago, but gods does it feel like an eternity. He is so much like her in so many ways. You wonder if one day he’ll get the chance to lead like her.

He looks at you, waiting for some response. When you aren’t quite fast enough he fills in the blanks.

“Will, don’t talk to me like I’m a child. I know what happened to me, I’ve felt it before. I know the risks. What was I supposed to do? We couldn’t just stay there, you needed to rest, and it wasn’t safe and we were all exhausted and Rachel managed to get us a car, and . . . I felt fine.” He deflates then, curling away from you and staring down at the table. “Besides, it doesn’t matter if I disappear for good, as long as-”

“Nico.” The volume of your own voice startles you. You hadn’t even realized that you were speaking until you had already spoken. “Don’t say you don’t matter. Whatever else happens or has happened Nico, you have to know that’s not true.” He looks at you from underneath his fringe, like it’s a wall that can keep the two of you at arm’s length. You are at a loss for words. It feels like you
have exhausted every way that you could possibly say that he means something, to you, and to the others at camp.

This is where your feelings get complicated. This is where you have grown from the angry, jealous boy you were a year ago.

As angry as you are, as stupid as you think his decision is, you know that it’s bigger than just a few words. You can’t just say ‘self-loathing’ and pin that to Nico, and say that’s it, you’ve done it. You can’t say ‘sad’ or ‘depressed’ or ‘scared’ or ‘lost’ because one-word fixes are not accurate measures of a soul’s narrative.

If there is one thing you’ve learned about Nico it’s that he has a hero’s soul, he wants to do good things and make people happy. He wants to love, and live, but there are things that remind him how close death is. There are parts of him that are numb to fear, and inflexible in the face of new hope.

But you have also learned that if you can find new ways to look at him, he can find new ways to look at himself and see that parts of his soul that are yearning for a change. And hey, maybe that’s the key. Maybe you just have to find a way to show him his reflection through you.

“Nico, do you ever worry about me dying?” you ask.

“. . . No. I mean—” He chokes off. You can see a jolt of fear wind up his body.

You sit and wait. Nico looks at you.

“You’re not angry?” he asks.

“Well, you’re not finished speaking yet. I’m sure you have your reasons.” You’re not going to lie; the ‘no’ threw you for a loop at first. Still, Nico has worked too hard to keep you alive. He must want you alive. Nico looks down at his hands. He picks at a scar between his thumb and index finger.

“I think . . . I think that after all I’ve done for the gods they would let me have you,” he says, after a while.

“Let you have me?” You’re not sure you really understand what he’s trying to say.

“I mean—I . . . If you died,” he says. Eros’ accusation flashes through your thoughts: *hubris*. You’re still not sure you understand him, but if he’s serious, the implications scare you more than any magic you’ve seen him use.

“You think they would bring me back, because they owe you?” you ask. Nico’s eyes go wide, and he finally looks up at you.

“No, not that much. I just think they’d look the other way when I brought you back. I know my father would. I could convince Daedalus to hold your soul in judgment, he doesn’t like me but we understand each other. We’ve talked a lot since he became a judge. I know I could convince him. And then . . . For a child of Hades all it takes is a second, one moment when no one is looking,” he says. His eyes are bright with a desperate need to be understood.

“What if Daedalus didn’t hold my soul, what if I got passed through?” You’re trying to get at something closer to your own experience of death, something more final than what Nico is suggesting.

“Elysium isn’t that big, I would find you.” He is so sure.
“And what if I don’t get to go to Elysium?”

“You’ll go to Elysium,” he says, clearly offed by the very suggestion that you wouldn’t. Then he softens and frowns. “Will you’re so- you’re good Will. You are so good. You know that, right?”

Horror dawns on his face. You have never seen Nico look horrified before.

“I hope so. But Nico that’s not . . . What if I chose to be reincarnated?”

It’s a low blow. You know his sister chose that same fate to stop him from bringing her back, and you’re not sure he’s purged all the resentment from his heart.

“Then I . . . I guess I lose you,” he says at long last. Nico turns away and makes to stand up but you put a hand on his arm to stop him.

“And what if I waited for you?” you ask. Nico looks at you as if you’ve started speaking backwards.

“What?”

“What if I chose to be reincarnated, but I waited for you, so that we could say goodbye, or you could come with me, or whatever happens,” you ask. Nico opens his mouth, and then closes it. There are tears in his eyes, but he doesn’t let them spill.

“My father has -for me, when I die- he has a room for me. In the palace,” he gestures at the air like Hades is right there, if only you could open your eyes and see it.

“You mean you’ll. . .”

“It’s immortality,” he says. And then he looks up at the sky. “Some days I worry that I won’t know I’m dead. I’ll just be here, and then I’ll be in the underworld, in my room, and it won’t occur to me that I shouldn’t be there. And I’ll leave, because it’s what I’m used to, and I’ll walk this world, but no one will see me, and no one will recognize me, because time passes in leaps and bounds for the gods. And I’ll never know it’s because you all have died, and gone, and . . . reincarnated, probably. I’ll think it’s just because you’ve moved on and forgotten me, and I can’t find you anymore. And I’ll never know I’m dead.”

“Nico-” you don’t know what you could possibly do to assuage that fear, but you refuse to sit by and watch him helplessly grapple with it. Nico just shrugs and shakes his head.

“So no, I’m not afraid of you dying.” He digs his nail into the scar between his thump and his forefinger, but it is not a scab. It cannot be picked away.

“But you think about it a lot?” you venture.

“I don’t want you to feel pain.”

“I think it might be more than that.” You reach for the hand with his scar and pull it free from his worrying fingers. Your thumb rubs small, soothing circles over his scar. Nico scowls at your linked finger, but he offers no resistance. Then he looks you in the eye.

“Fine, you know what? I’m scared of losing you,” he says this like an accusation.

“The thought of you dying scares me.” You press his hand between both of yours, holding it tightly.

“Why?”
“Because I’m scared of losing you too.” Your voice is hardly more than a whisper. This time, when Nico asks his question it is full of trepid hope.

“. . .Why?”

“Oh gods Nico you have to know.” You lift his scarred hand to your lips and kiss it. “You have to know how I feel about you.”

He looks off to the side, fidgeting in his seat. He mumbles something low underneath his breath.

“What?” you ask.

Nico turns back towards you, as red as sunrise. He looks at the hand you are holding.

“You didn’t kiss me back.”

There is a pause. Nico doesn’t look away, though you can feel his hands shaking. Part of you thinks, abstractly, that a kiss should be the least of Nico’s worries. Your problems, all of your problems, are so much bigger than a kiss. Your problems are the kinds of things that make or break lives. But this is one thing you can do now, for the both of you, to make your problems feel, if not smaller, than manageable. This is one thing that will make you feel like you are big enough move mountains.

Love does not make miracles; it makes miracles possible.

You cup his face in your hands, tilting the angle of his head, so that your lips compliment his lips. He gasps against your kiss, as if this comes as a surprise to him. Well, at least now there is no chance of confusion. You try to kiss him slowly, but your feelings have never been the kind that can be measured into neat, steady, drops. No, you hold his face in your hands and kiss him like your life depends on it. It is gentle, but desperate, craving. Nico makes a muffled noise, you’re not sure if it’s pleasure or surprise, but he kisses you back.

He doesn’t know how to move his lips, but that’s okay. You kiss with slow ardor until he sets his hands against your chest, and then he pushes them slowly up around your neck to pull you closer, and you kiss him faster, opening your mouth against his to suck at his lower lip. Your hands move from his face, down his shoulders to settle on his waist and then Nico is opening his mouth, just a little, and-

“Guys!” The door to the back patio bangs open, smacking against the brick wall hard enough to rattle its glass windowpanes. You and Nico jump apart. Your first thought is play it cool, so you lean against the table, with your head propped. Nico’s first thought is apparently stab, because he’s halfway to drawing his knife from his boot before he seems to realize that the person in the doorway is Rachel and not any number of magical creatures who hate you.

Rachel pauses. You look down at the table, overly conscious of the fact that you really want to look at Nico, and confirm things before Rachel starts asking questions, even as you try to look natural so she doesn’t ask questions.

Nico sighs and tucks his knife back into his boot.

“Gods, Rachel, don’t do that. I almost threw my knife at you,” he settles back down into his seat. You make a noise of ascent, as you’re a little far from being able to make words at this moment.

Both Rachel and Nico stare at you like you’ve suddenly been possessed.

You cannot believe that Nico is more relaxed in this situation than you are.
“Everything’s great, don’t mind me,” you say, rolling your head and then settling it back on your hand again in what has to be the least casual gesture you’ve ever made.

You really should relax, but you just kissed Nico, for real. You pretty much made out, and Rachel just interrupted you, and oh gods above you have not felt this stupid over a boy since you were in middle school. Nico gives you another one of those looks out of the corner of his eye. This time it comes with a smile.

Rachel looks at you, then quickly to Nico, then back at you and shakes her head.

“Okay, so you’re being weird, but I don’t have time to bother with that, because,” here, she marches over and throws her sketchbook down on the table.

On its cover there’s a garage with a blue tin roof and a red neon sign. It sits on a dusty road, although you can see hits of buildings behind it. A red pickup struck sits perched on a lift inside. Rachel’s eyes are bright with wonder as she looks at the thing her own visions have wrought.

“I’ve found Apollo.”

Chapter End Notes

This is probably the last update I'll be able to post until the end of the semester, but I hope you enjoyed!

Works inspired by this one

The Places Where We Go by crossword

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!